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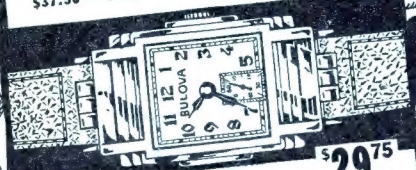

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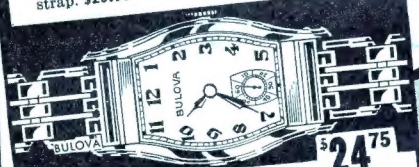

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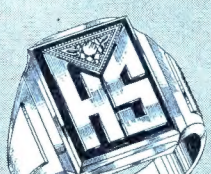

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CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER, 1940 VOL. IV NO. 4

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An author needed a character for a story—so he put his friend in a tale of Caribbean piracy. But the friend had to live that story!

READERS' DEPARTMENT

OF THINGS BEYOND **5**

Editorial Prophecy and Future Issues.

Illustrations by: Cartier and Isip

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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OF THINGS BEYOND

COMING up in the next issue of Unknown is, as a sort of appropriate relief from the calculated and teasing uncertainty of Jack Williamson's current "Darker Than You Think"—a humor fantasy. One of the pleasant possibilities of fantasy is that it can include all the field of more hidebound literature, and add a number of touches of its own.

"The Mislaid Charm" is an example of what can be done with fantasy on the wackey side. A. M. Phillips did a rather lovely job on a tale of a gnome that stole his tribal charm, got pressed unpleasantly closely, and cached the charm in the breast of an unsuspecting human.

The trouble is, the human was unsuspecting; the charm had itself a lovely time, and the recipient had a time that would have been thoroughly miserable if he'd been sober enough to know it. A thoroughly remarkable charm—and yarn.

Also coming is a Theodore Sturgeon yarn called "Shottle Bop." Sturgeon has a nice idea about a vanishing store with a sign reading only "Shottle Bop—We Sell Bottles With Things In Them." The sign, it seems, was more informative than first glance would suggest. The tale concerns a gentleman who bought one of the Bottles With Things In Them.

Incidentally, L. Ron Hubbard, a usually regular contributor to these pages, has been absent from the scene for some time. He's been charting the coast of Alaska. One of his recent stories was "The Devil's Rescue," if you remember, a tale written some six months ago. Maybe the Devil didn't like his yarn. Anyway, latest information has it that, while not in far southern waters, Ron Hubbard's had a slight case of shipwreck himself—off the Alaskan coast. It happened about the time that story came out.

The ship, it happens, was his ketch, "Magician II." Maybe that Magician had unfortunate dealings with the Devil?

At present, Ron Hubbard's heading for home and more stories are expected; he made land successfully, but claims he had some difficulty distinguishing it from the sea. It was, apparently, doing something fancy in the line of raining.

To date, H. L. Gold and L. Sprague de Camp have reported no undesirable manifestations; perhaps "None But Lucifer" appealed to the aforesaid gentleman as a more desirable treatment of his character and disposition?

Which reminds me that the Subscription Department reports that September, 1939, issue of Unknown, which carried "None But Lucifer" predicting the war, has been exhausted. Readers who missed it seem to have been interested in checking up on that yarn. Perhaps looking for more prophecies?

THE EDITOR.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED - THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH, MARY. EVERYTHING LOOKS SO HOPELESS
IT ISN'T HOPELESS, BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY RADIO. TOM GREEN IS DOING WELL. TALK TO HIM
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT. RADIO'S STILL A YOUNG GROWING FIELD
TOM'S RIGHT. AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOOD PAY
TRAINING AT HOME FOR RADIO IS PRACTICAL AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST
SOON I CAN START FIXING RADIOS
THERE'S NO END TO THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS
OR WORK ON LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS
OR GET A JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION
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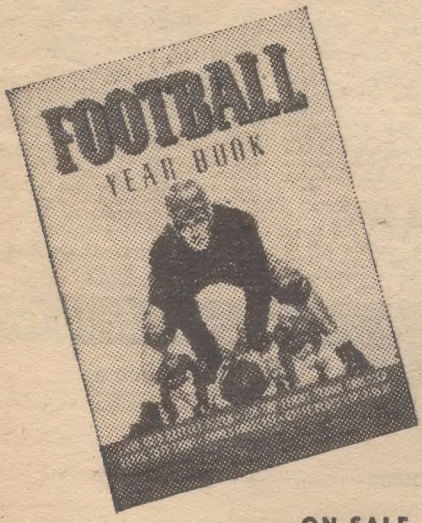

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FOOTBALL YEAR BOOK

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DARKER THAN YOU THINK

by JACK WILLIAMSON

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

● The germs of the witch folk hide in your blood—and Man's fast losing the race!

THIS story is presented as pure fiction. The publishers, the editors, and the writer neither possess nor have seen any evidence of its truth, not included in the manuscript itself.

In strict fairness to the reader, however, we feel compelled to point out that it *might* be true.

If it is true, there is danger even in the reading of it—danger to somewhat more than one's peace of mind. Perhaps several hundred thousand may safely share a burden of knowledge that was fatal to a few brave men. But —we can't be *sure!*

The sources of this material cannot now be traced. It reached us in a manner that leaves it cleverly and completely anonymous. It was accompanied only by the request that it be made public in this manner—if writer, editor and publisher cared to take the risk.

Somebody, then, believes. When one does believe—or when he allows himself even to suspect—it is impossible to do nothing. Life becomes a kind of walking nightmare; one simply must do something.

For there is still time, or so, at least it seems, somebody believes.

It is true that the contents of Mondrick's green box have been destroyed, but the green box, we must remind the reader, contained but a few crowning items of evidence. Most of the facts that Mondrick gathered to support his theory still surround us, in our homes and on the streets. They speak in the voices of our friends, whisper from our newspapers, shriek from our radios, murmur from our own secret hearts. They haunt our very dreams.

Scientific theories are commonly evaluated by a principle of economy. Other things being equal, the scientific thinker will prefer that explanation which uses the fewest and simplest assumptions to fit together the greatest number of observed phenomena.

From that point alone, even without the contents of the green box, Dr. Mondrick's theory is worth grave consideration. On a very simple basis, it accounts for a great many things that are otherwise difficult to explain, and for some that cannot otherwise be explained at all.

The professional anthropologists whom we have consulted are very cautious in their attitude toward Mondrick's Homo lycanthropus. A typical reaction, from a veteran in this field:

"The genus Homo has doubtless been represented by scores, or even hundreds of species. Most of them, for want of any material remains at all, are known only by the sketchiest sort of inference.

"These lost types of man certainly differed very much in their physical and mental characteristics. What we know of such recent ones as the Cro-Magnon and the Neanderthal shows that clearly. They must often have been deadly enemies. Sometimes they may have interbred. No one could say that Homo lycanthropus is impossible; there is, in fact, an immense field of evidence that such types did exist.

"Fragments of one skull, remember, found by Charles Dawson at Piltdown, were enough to establish Eoanthropus. A skull cap, left thigh bone, and three teeth established the Java man, Pithecanthropus erectus. Mondrick's discovery appears to have been equally important. The loss of the green box is a tragic blow to anthropology."

Masterpiece, that may be, of understatement!

One prominent ethnologist took a more positive interest in this manuscript.

"The primitive belief in magic and witchcraft and lycanthropy is absolutely universal," he commented. "It exists in communities, from Europe to Tasmania, that have no cultural connection whatever. Dr. Mondrick offers the only convincing explanation of that fact that I have seen."

But we will leave this strange study of our own troubled times and our own secret lives to the reader's judgment.

I.

THE GIRL came up to Will Barbee, on the seaplane pier at New York's new LaGuardia Airport, while they were waiting for the Lisbon *Clipper*. There was no reason for the sudden shiver that grated his teeth together—unless it was a fresh blast of the damp east wind. Because the girl looked cool and modern and beautiful as a streamlined electric icebox.

She had a million dollars' worth of flame-red hair. White, soft, sweetly serious, her face confirmed Barbee's first dazzled impression. Her rather large mouth appeared humorous and quickly expressive. Barbee looked twice into her alert, grave eyes and decided that they were distinctly greenish.

He searched her for the cause of that intuitive alarm—and began to feel a strong, unreasoned attraction. Her green gabardine business suit looked stylish, becoming, and expensive. Against the windy chill of this overcast October afternoon, she wore a short coat of some heavy white fur that he decided must be arctic wolf, bleached perhaps, or albino.

But the kitten *was* unusual.

She carried a snakeskin bag, with the double handle over her arm. It was open, like a flattened basket. The kitten was peering contentedly out of it. It was a perfectly darling little black kitten, less than half grown. It wore a red silk ribbon, neatly tied in a bow.

They made a pretty picture, but the kitten, blinking peacefully at the bustling, orderly confusion on the dock, didn't seem to fit. The girl wasn't the flighty, sentimental type. And the streamlined young business woman simply doesn't include kittens in her ensemble.

He was certain he hadn't seen her before—that red hair was something you wouldn't forget. He looked around, to be sure that her intense, disturbing eyes were really fixed on him. They were.

"Barbee?"

Her voice was crisp and vigorous. It had a vital, throaty power that was somehow as exciting as her hair and eyes. Yet it was quite casual, impersonal.

"Will Barbee," he admitted. "Of the Clarendon *Star*." He enlarged upon it because he didn't want her to go away. "I'm in New York to meet the Mondrick expedition. You see, they're our home-town boys, returning

with scientific booty from their four years of perilous tangles with the Jap, the chink, the Russ, and the scorpion, in remote Mongolia."

His level gray eyes continued to study her, with a still-puzzled approval.

"And you?"

Candidly, the girl returned his gaze.

"I'm a rival." Her voice held a purring chuckle of friendliness. "April Bell, of the Clarendon *Clarion.*" She showed him a tiny black notebook, palmed in her left hand. "I was told to beware of you, Barbee."

"Oh!" He grinned and gestured across at a semicircle of microphones and newsreel and television cameras, surrounded by men fussing with wires and gadgets. "I thought you must be a columnist or something, meeting the ambassador." He peered back at the happily blinking black kitten in the snakeskin bag. "You aren't really on the *Clarion?* Clarendon's not so big. I'd have seen you."

"I'm new on the *Clarion,*" she told him. "In fact, I just took my journalism degree in California last spring. This is my first big assignment." Her voice was childishly confidential. "I was in New York, anyhow. They wired me to join the expedition and fly back to Clarendon with them."

She smiled hopefully.

"I guess I'm pretty much a stranger to Clarendon—we left when I was a little girl. And I'm afraid I didn't learn many ologies in college. I was wondering, Barbee, if I could ask you a few things."

Barbee was looking at her teeth. They were even and strong and white—the sort of teeth with which beautiful women in dentifrice advertisements gnaw bones. It occurred to him that the spectacle of April Bell gnawing a red bone would somehow be infinitely fascinating.

"Would you mind, really?"

Barbee called back his thoughts. He grinned at her. He was beginning to understand. She was a fresh cub—but clever as Lilith. The kitten was doubtless intended to complete a picture of feminine helplessness, and annihilate anything that remained of male resistance.

"We're rivals, lady," he reminded her with heavy sternness. Her faintly hurt look began to tug at him. As gruffly as possible, he said: "Your name isn't really April Bell?"

"It was Suzan." Her dark eyes pleaded. "But April would look so much nicer in a by-line." Her voice was small and husky. "Please—about the expedition—Dr. Mondrick must be important if this reception is all for him?"

She gestured at the line of waiting cameras.

"But it isn't," Barbee told her. "The big fish today is a recalled ambassador, who's supposed to have the dope on where Hitler strikes next. Though that doesn't mean that Mondrick isn't important. Word seems to have been quietly sent ahead that he will have something significant to say. I see two or three scientific writers among the war experts."

He was trying to remember the name of a certain mythological lady. She was fascinating—as lovely, no doubt, as April Bell. But she had a disturbing way of turning the men she fascinated into unpleasant beasts. What was it—Circe?

Barbee hadn't spoken that name aloud—he was certain of it. But the quick, humorous twitch of the girl's red mouth, the gleam of slightly malicious amusement in her eyes, gave him a brief, rattled impression that he had.

He laughed suddenly and said: "I'll tell you what I can—and probably I'll get it in the neck when Preston Troy reads my story in the *Clarion*, too. Or shall I write it out for you?"

"My shorthand is very good, thank you."

"Well, Paul Mondrick is the big shot of Clarendon University. Not one of your narrow specialists, and he doesn't blow his horn. But any of his associates will tell you that he's about the greatest all-around student of mankind in the world today. Biologist, psychologist, anthropologist, ethnologist—he seems to know about everything that pertains to his pet subject.

"Mondrick is the kingpin of the Clarendon Foundation. He raises the jack and spends it—on some program that he has never talked much about. Four years ago he took this University Foundation expedition to Asia. They went to look for something. Something, the rumor got around, that he had been on the trail of for twenty years. His life work, and the life work of such a man is apt to be important."

"And what was he looking for?"

"We start even there—and the best man wins." Barbee grinned. "It seems that Mondrick cabled ahead. To the university. To Troy, my publisher. To the *Times*, here in New York, and *Science Service*. He found what he was looking for, and he's ready to tell about it."

He glanced at the waiting cameras, the little group of newsmen gathering near them. "But probably Hitler will get the headlines."

THERE WAS a stir and clamor among the spectators packed upon the ten-cents-a-head "soap box." They pointed into the gray overcast. The damp wind shuddered to the drum of mighty motors. The *Clipper* was coming in.

The girl asked: "You know the others—with Mondrick?"

It was a moment before Barbee answered. A flood of memories flowed about him. "I know them."

"Tell me."

The crisp, eager voice of April Bell broke his brief reverie. Looking at the flame of her hair, Barbee said:

"The three men with Mondrick are Sam Quain and Nick Spivak and Rex Chittum. They're the oldest friends I have. We were freshmen together—suite mates in Trojan Hall at the university. You see . . . well—"

Barbee halted, awkwardly. The quick, sympathetic flash of April Bell's smile made him resume.

"They were already disciples of old Mondrick, you see. They were taking up his courses—what he called the 'humane sciences.' They worshiped him, and he gave them scholarships and special advantages. I think he had already selected them for this expedition."

The girl's greenish eyes were uncomfortably penetrating.

"But you—"

"I was left out," Barbee confessed. "The same bug had bitten me. I wanted to go with them. Guess I just didn't make the grade. I used to think that old Mondrick had taken an unreasonable dislike to me. Perhaps I was wrong.

"Anyhow, we were friends. The Four Muleteers, Sam used to call us—from our mule-back summer jaunts into Mexico and Guatemala and Peru. They were hunting prehistoric skulls for Mondrick. And I was collecting local color, by then, for adventure novels that somehow never got written."

Barbee looked past the girl into the cold, leaden sky that now was throbbing like a gong to the engines of the unseen *Clipper*.

"But we drifted apart. Mondrick made them specialize in different departments of his 'humane sciences.' Together they make a team—trained to do whatever it is that they are doing.

"Miss Bell," he demanded suddenly—to end that unpleasant memory of defeat that had hurt, "how did you know my name?"

Her green eyes lit with a teasing mockery. "Maybe it was just a hunch."

Barbee shivered again.

He knew that he himself possessed what he called the "nose for news"—an intuitive perception of human motivations and the impending events that would spring from them. It wasn't a faculty that he could analyze or account for. A blind "hunch" would simply tell him that the witness was lying, or that the gambling czar had got fatally independent about his protection outlays, or that it was time for the Mill Street arsonist to strike again.

He knew, too, that the capacity was not very unusual. Most successful reporters possessed it—even if because anything suggesting superstition was unfashionable, they denied it. A vague but imperative hunch—and the fire, the murder, the bombing raid, followed almost as a matter of course.

The faculty was sometimes more curse than blessing. A timeless sixth sense, Barbee often thought of it, that kept him tensed with an uneasy alertness. Except when he was drunk. He knew that a great many newsmen drank too much, and he thought that was a good part of the reason.

April Bell's intuitions were, therefore, not completely surprising, except that they went a little too far. Barbee tried to relax his instinctive alarm. There was always a sane explanation of everything if you could only find it.

"Now—who are they?"

Her red head nodded toward a little waiting group that had been allowed past the police line—a dozen people, standing apart from the camera crews and the newsmen, eagerly watching the roaring sky.

"Why ask me?"

She smiled repentantly.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to astonish you, and I have friends in Clarendon. These people, waiting? They look like friends and relatives. Can we talk to them?"

"If you like," Barbee yielded. "Come along."

Her arm slipped through his. Even the white fur, where it brushed his wrist, felt electric, exciting. This girl did things to him. He had believed himself impervious to women, and this simultaneous attraction and queer, lingering repulsion disturbed him.

Somewhat unsteadily, Barbee began:

"The tall, white-haired woman—the one standing alone, with the black glasses and the lonely face? She's Mondrick's wife. They say she was beautiful once. Used to go with him on field trips. But she has been blind for many years—somehow she was mauled by a leopard when they were on the Congo."

"I see." April Bell's white face held sympathy. "And the others?"

"The plump woman in gray, just beyond, is some sort of cousin who acts as companion. And—see the old gent just lighting his pipe—only he's too excited to strike a match? That's old Ben Chittum. Rex's granddad, and the only relative he has. Runs a newstand back in Clarendon—it's down on Center Street, just across from the *Star* building. He put Rex through school till he could make his own way. He has been saving for months to meet the *Clipper*."

Barbee didn't add that he himself had contributed ten dollars toward the ticket. The old fellow had at first refused to accept it. But Barbee insisted that it wasn't for him, but only a tribute to Rex.

"And the rest?" urged April.

"The little fellow with the big nose is Nick Spivak's father," Barbee told her. "He has a tailor shop in Brooklyn, on Flatbush Avenue. And the proud-looking, dark-haired little woman is Mrs. Spivak. Nick's the only son. He's got over saying 'woik' and 'goil,' but he still thinks the world of them.

"Most of the others are friends of Mondrick. Fisher and Bennet, from the foundation—"

"The blonde?" interrupted April. "Smiling at you?"

"That's Nora," Barbee said. "Sam Quain's wife."

He had first met Nora the same night Sam did—it was at the freshman mixer during the registration week at Clarendon. Twelve years had changed her surprisingly little. She came smiling to them, leading Pat.

PATRICIA QUAIN was now five years old, and very proud of that fact. She had her mother's wide blue eyes and corn-silk hair, but her stubborn face showed a reflection of Sam's square chin. She was tugging back, peering hungrily into the gray sky.

"Mother—will daddy's *Clipper* be safe in the clouds?"

"Of course, darling." And Nora called: "Do you think they'll be much longer, Will? I can hardly wait. Just think—I haven't seen Sam for four years. Pat won't know him."

"Yes, I will, mother." The child had Sam's own stubborn determination. "I know my own daddy."

"They've already landed," Barbee said. "They'll be taxiing in. Nora, this is Miss April Bell. She's learning to be a sob sister. Anything you tell her may be used against you."

"Really, Mr. Barbee!"

April's protest was laughing. When the eyes of the two women met, however, Barbee sensed fire—something like the sudden burst of sparks when hard metal meets the grinding wheel. Smiling with angelic sweetness, they shook hands.

"Darling! I'm so happy to meet you."

Barbee knew that they hated each other savagely.

"Mother," said Pat, "may I touch the dear little kitten?"

"No, darling—please!"

Nora caught hastily at the little girl. But her pink little hand was already reaching eagerly. The black kitten blinked and spat and scratched. With a gasping sob that she stifled stubbornly, Pat drew back to her mother.

"Mrs. Quain," cooed April, "I'm so sorry."

"I don't like you," Pat said defiantly.

"There!" Shrill-voiced with excitement, old Ben Chittum limped past them, waving his pipe. "They're coming in!"

The Spivaks ran to join the line on the pier's edge. "Mama, there they come—and our Nick can fly with the best of them!"

"Come, mother," urged Pat. "It's daddy."

Barbee was left beside April Bell.

"Fifi, you mustn't." She patted the kitten reprovingly. "You spoiled our interview."

Barbee felt an impulse to follow Nora and explain that April was a stranger. He still had a tender spot for Nora. But April's smile dazzled him again, and her voice chimed contritely:

"I'm sorry, Barbee—truly."

"It's all right," said Barbee. "But how come the kitten?"

Her green-black eyes were once more searching, intense. For a moment Barbee felt a keyed-up, half-frightened alertness, as if the girl were playing some difficult and dangerous game. A cub reporter, of course, might be jittery about her first big assignment. But here, somehow the hunch sense was telling him, was something coldly and desperately deadly. That chilling shudder lapped at him again. After the merest instant, however, her frozen white face was alive again, and smiling.

"Fifi belongs to my aunt Agatha," she told him brightly. "I've been staying with her and she had some shopping, so she left Fifi with me. She was to meet me here, but I guess the police wouldn't let her through. Excuse me, and I'll find if she's come—and get rid of the little beast before she hurts somebody else."

She hurried along the dock, searching the crowd of spectators on the platform. Barbee stared after her with a puzzled and uneasy interest. Even the lithe, free grace of her walk fascinated him. She was untamed.

Barbee shrugged uneasily and followed Nora to the group watching the great plane coming in. He was tired, and probably he had been drinking more than was good for him. It was only natural that he should feel a strong response to such a girl as April Bell. What man wouldn't? She could certainly look forward to a successful journalistic career.

Nora brought her attention from the *Clipper*, asking:

"Is she important?"

"Just met her," Barbee said. "She's—unusual."

"Don't let her be," Nora urged him. "She is—"

She paused as if to find a word for April Bell. The warm smile left her face and her hand moved unconsciously to draw Pat to her. She didn't find the word.

"Don't, Will!" she whispered. "Please!"

The engines of the incoming *Clipper* drowned her voice.

II.

Old Ben Chittum led an eager rush toward the gangplank, with Papa and Mama Spivak at his heels. But police stopped them. Officials with brief cases hurried about importantly. The packed spectators on the platform craned their necks in impatient silence.

"Paul?" It was the voice of Mondrick's blind wife, strained, as if with a sudden fear. "Paul?"

Barbee was watching eagerly. For Sam Quain's bronze head and his blue-eyed, stubborn face. For quiet, thin, spectacled Nick Spivak. For Rex Chittum, with his genial grin and his dark, movie-star good looks. For old Mondrick himself, ruddy and stout and bald and grave.

The ambassador came down the gangplank, followed by a worried-looking aid. Other passengers followed. A bearded, hollow-eyed Jew, limping, with one arm slung. A nurse, with two blond, frightened children. Three hurried, well-fed businessmen.

But Mondrick and his associates still didn't come.

The ambassador stopped in front of the line of mikes and cameras. Flash bulbs flickered, while he tried to strike poses that would draw emphasis from his paunch and his bald spot. Speaking into the mikes, while news cameras ground, he said nothing in careful diplomatic language. Then he hurried on, into the gray chill of the early dusk, with the worried aid tagging after him.

The newsmen were about to disperse when an airline official rushed to them from the *Clipper*. They began setting up their equipment again. A policeman came up to the little group about Barbee.

"Sorry, folks," he said. "But we've got to clear the dock."

"But we're waiting for the expedition," the blind woman protested anxiously. "Dr. Mondrick is my husband. We're all relatives and friends—"

"Sorry, Mrs. Mondrick," said the officer. "I don't quite understand it myself. But your husband says that the dock has to be cleared before he comes off. Except for the newspaper and radio people. Let's go quietly, please."

"No," little Pat said defiantly. "I want to see my daddy."

Herself looking as frightened as the child, Nora led her away. Mama Spivak uttered a low, wailing cry and began to sob. Old Ben Chittum shook his black pipe and began a quavering protest:

"I rode the cars all the way just to see my son. And now, by gosh—"

Barbee shook his head.

"Better wait, Ben." The old man limped after the others, muttering Barbee showed his press credentials, submitted to a swift search for concealed weapons, and joined the group of reporters. He found April Bell beside him.

THE BLACK KITTEN must have been returned to Aunt Agatha, for the snakeskin bag was closed now. The girl looked breathless and pale. She was watching the gangplank with an anxious, feverish intentness.

"The fools," she whispered soundlessly.

She seemed to start when she became aware of Barbee's searching glance. Her flame-haired head moved swiftly. For an instant he felt the tense, desperate readiness of a feral thing, crouched to leap. Then she smiled, and her green eyes lit with a gay comradeship.

"Waal, pard," her electric voice assumed a stage drawl, "looks like we-all have just about bulldogged a page one story. Hyar they come!"

Sam Quain led the way down the gangplank. Even in that first glimpse, Barbee saw that he had changed. His square-jawed face was burned dark, his blond hair bleached almost white. He looked tired, and a good deal more than four years older. And there was something else.

That something else was stamped also upon the three who followed.

A stained, battered topi covered Mondrick's bald head. His heavy face sagged wearily, it was hollowed and pale. Barbee wondered if the explorer had been ill. Mondrick, he remembered, had suffered from asthma. Some old heart weakness had once forced him to leave their high camp in the Andes.

But even a very ill man might have been smiling upon this triumphant return to his country and his friends and his wife, with his life's work done. And Mondrick's haggard face looked grimly preoccupied.

Nick Spivak and Rex Chittum came out of the *Clipper* behind him. They also wore sun-bleached khaki. They were lean and brown and grave. Rex must have heard old Ben Chittum's quavering hail from the police line at the end of the dock. But he gave no sign.

He and Nick were carrying, between them, a heavy, green-painted wooden box. It looked roughly but strongly made, as if by some village-bazaar craftsman. It was reinforced with iron straps, and the hand-forged hasp was secured with a heavy padlock. They lifted it by two riveted leather handles.

Mondrick turned anxiously to watch them bring it down the gangplank. He seemed to caution them to be careful, and he waited until they had brought it safe to his side. Then, with Sam Quain at his other arm, he led the way toward the waiting cameras.

Barbee suddenly recognized the extra "something" that stamped each of them. It was fear, and they were fighting it.

That was evident from every move. They were not elated victors returning to announce a new conquest of knowledge. They were tight-lipped veterans, calm and controlled, moving steadily into a desperate action.

"I wonder what's in the box," whispered April Bell.

"Whatever it is," breathed Barbee, "the discovery doesn't seem to have made them very happy. A fundamentalist might think they had stumbled into hell."

"No," said the girl. "Men aren't that much afraid of hell!"

Barbee saw Sam Quain's eyes upon him. The tension of the moment checked his impulse to shout a greeting. He merely waved his hand. Sam nodded slightly. But the desperate, hostile alertness didn't leave his face.

Mondrick stopped before the cameras. Flash bulbs flared under the gray dusk as he waited for the younger men to close in beside him. Barbee stared at his face under the pitiless flashes.

Mondrick was a shattered man. Sam and Nick and Rex were tough.

The frightful burden—whatever it was—had merely drawn and sobered and hardened them. But Mondrick was broken. His sagging face was haunted. His tired, jerky gesture betrayed ragged nerves.

"Gentlemen, thank you for waiting."

His voice was low and tense and hoarse. Still dazzled from the flashlights, his eyes roved in a fearful way across the faces before him. He glanced at his three companions, at the green box, as if for reassurance.

"Because"—and it seemed to Barbee that his anxious voice was desperately hurried, as if he were fearful of being stopped—"because we have something to make public. Please broadcast my statement if you can. Film it. Get it on the wires and in your papers as soon as possible."

"Sure, doc." A radio announcer grinned. "That's our business. Shoot."

And a news cameraman demanded: "Anything to say about the war?"

"I'm not going to talk about the war," Mondrick said solemnly. "What I have to say is a good deal more important—but it may explain to you, after all, why wars are fought. It will explain a good deal that men have never understood, a good many things they have tried to deny."

Mondrick caught his breath with a wheezing sound. Barbee remembered that old asthma. He saw the quick alarm on Sam Quain's face. Sam offered a handkerchief, and Mondrick mopped sweat off his face—while a chill blast of the moist east wind set Barbee to shivering again.

"I'm going to tell you some stunning things, gentlemen," Mondrick's hoarse voice went on. "I am going to tell you about a masked and secret enemy, waiting unsuspected in your midst—an enemy far more insidious and far more deadly than any of your fifth columns. I'm going to tell you of the expected coming of a Black Messiah, whose appearance will be the signal for a savage and hideous and incredible rebellion."

The weary man gasped painfully again.

"Prepare yourselves for a jolt, gentlemen. This is a terrible thing. You will be incredulous at first, as I was. But when you have seen the evidence, you'll believe.

"My discovery—or ours"—and his hollow eyes glanced at the three—"solves many enigmas. Problems that have baffled the experts. And riddles so obvious, so much a part of our lives, that we are never conscious of them.

"Why is evil?"

His lead-hued face was a mask of pain.

"Have you ever sensed a malignant purpose behind misfortune? Have you wondered why nation after nation is crumbling at the very touch of armed conquest? Have some of you wondered, sometimes, at the division in yourselves—at the realization that your unconscious minds hold wells of black horror? Have you wondered—"

Mondrick labored for breath again, pressing both hands against his sides. An ominous tinge of blue had touched his face. His voice was shallow, strained, higher-keyed.

"I've no time for that catalogue," he gasped. "But . . . listen!"

WITH A DISTURBED and uneasy quickness, Barbee looked about. The cameras were softly whirring. Mechanically, bewildered reporters were taking notes. He saw April Bell. She was standing in a frozen pose. White with pressure, both her hands gripped the top of her snakeskin bag. Dilated, green-black; her eyes stared at Mondrick with a peculiar intensity.

Barbee wondered about her for a moment. Why did she frighten him? Was his tired brain merely cloaking her with hallucinations? How much of what Mondrick called good was in her, and how much evil, and what was the point of conflict?

Mondrick straightened from his struggle for breath, resumed:

"Remember, this thing is no mere whim of the moment. I first suspected it twenty-five years ago. I was then a practicing psychiatrist. I gave up that career because the thing I suspected made a mockery of all I had been taught.

"I turned to other fields, seeking evidence to disprove what I suspected. It didn't exist. Item by item, archaeology, anthropology, and ethnology supplied facts that confirmed the most terrible thing a man has ever feared.

"For many years I was alone. You will understand presently what that meant—and how extremely difficult it was to find aid. But I did find men that I could trust, and I trained them to share my work."

Mondrick's haggard face briefly tried to smile. He glanced once more at the hard, taut faces of Sam and Rex and Nick, and then a sudden paroxysm bent him double with the effort to breathe. Sam Quain held his arm. In a moment, although more faintly, he spoke again:

"Forgive me. . . . I am subject to these attacks." He mopped his face. "Still, we had only a very disturbing theory," he went on. "We knew the world would require proof. That could exist only in the ashes of the past. Four years ago we went to the highlands of central Asia—to the area that appears to be the cradle of that hybrid breed we call mankind—to look for that proof.

"The newspapers have carried some hints of what we faced. The Chinese warned us to keep out. The Japanese hunted us as spies. Our camp was bombed by a Russian plane. Mongol brigands raided us. We almost perished of thirst, and we all but froze to death. It used to appear that the enemy already knew of us, and was determined to stop us before we even reached the proof.

"But these are tough boys with me!"

Mondrick bent to another gasping paroxysm.

"We found what we were looking for," he wheezed triumphantly. "And we brought it back." He nodded at the green wooden box, to which Nick and Rex still clung as if afraid that it would be snatched away. "And here it is."

Once again Mondrick searched the faces before him. Barbee met his hollow eyes for an instant and saw in them the conflict of dreadful urgency

and deadly fear. He knew that Mondrick wanted desperately to speak—to blurt out the bald facts—but was restrained by a dread of disbelief.

"Forgive me," croaked Mondrick, "if these precautions seem melodramatic. You will understand in a moment that they are necessary. And now I must speak abruptly. I must spread the news as widely as possible before I am stopped."

His haggard face was stark with dread.

"For there is danger. Every one of you . . . who listens and believes . . . is himself in mortal danger. But I hope . . . by spreading the truth as far and as swiftly as possible . . . to make it impossible for the enemy to stamp it out."

Mondrick fought for breath again.

"It was a hundred thousand years ago—"

His words were strangled. Sam Quain and Nick Spivak held his arms, tried to support him as he was flung into another desperate struggle for breath. His face and hands turned cyanotic blue.

"It can't be!" Barbee caught Sam Quain's frantic whisper. "There are no cats here!"

That made Barbee shoot a bewildered glance at April Bell. She was still staring at the struggling explorer, frozen as if in a trance of horror. Both hands still clutched the snakeskin bag.

But the kitten was gone. Anyhow, what harm could a kitten have done? Barbee looked at Mondrick again. They had laid him on his back. His convulsive kicks and fighting movements were already weaker. He was dying, as surely as if the garroter's iron collar were fast about his throat.

"Back!" Sam Quain shouted. "He must have air!"

Policemen pushed back reporters and cameramen. An ambulance came shrieking down the dock. But Mondrick ceased to move before it arrived. His blind wife came running, as if sight had returned. She knelt, touched his face and his breast. Tears streamed from the hollow scars under her dark glasses.

"Paul," she whispered, and made no other sound.

Sam Quain came shakenly away. Barbee was among the breath-taken reporters who surrounded him. His blue eyes were filmed with an in-dwelling horror.

"Yes, Will, he's dead," he said quietly. "You know he has had asthma for a great many years. He has suffered from a valvular heart disease, and this expedition had been pretty difficult for him. When this attack struck, I guess the old pump just couldn't take it."

Barbee pushed forward.

"Tell me, Sam—what was he trying to say?"

Sam Quain gulped. His hunted blue eyes fled from Barbee's face and came back again. Visibly, he tried to thrust away the horror that was like a pale cloak over him. He shrugged, shook his sun-bleached head.

"Yeah, Quain," rapped a voice over Barbee's shoulder. "What was it?" A news cameraman demanded: "What was all the build-up for?"

Sam Quain seemed to make up his mind.

"Nothing that would really make headlines, I'm afraid." He shook his head, and pity touched the lingering horror on his square-jawed face. "Dr. Mondrick had been ill for some time, you see. He had been dwelling on the importance of his discovery. I believe that he had come to exaggerate it in his own mind. We tried to restrain him from this rather melodramatic manner of making it public."

"You mean," the cameraman snarled indignantly, "there ain't nothing to it?"

"On the contrary," Sam Quain assured him. "It is quite important. But the rest of us felt that it would have been better to announce it in the usual way, in a paper read before some scientific body. And that, since this tragedy, is what we shall doubtless do in time."

"The old man hinted something about danger," rapped a reporter. "And then conked off. It's funny. You aren't frightened out, Quain?"

"Naturally, we're upset," Sam Quain said. "But Dr. Mondrick's death, at this moment, can't be anything more than a very unfortunate coincidence. Perhaps less. Doubtless the attack was due to his excitement."

"What about the secret enemy?" shot back the reporter. "And this Black Messiah?"

Sam Quain tried to smile.

"Dr. Mondrick read fiction for relaxation," he said. "I think that he was merely employing a figure of speech to make his announcement more dramatic. After all, the theory of evolution is no longer front-page news. The details of the origin of mankind are of extreme importance to such a man as Mondrick. But they don't interest the man in the street—unless they are dramatized."

"Hell!" The reporter turned away. "The old buzzard sure took me for a ride!" He saw Mondrick being lifted into the ambulance, the silent blind woman at his side. Abruptly he swung back. "What are your plans? When are you going to announce this discovery?"

"We are going on to Clarendon as soon as possible," Quain told him. "We shall study our finds, Mondrick's papers, our own notes and photographs. In due time we shall prepare a monograph to present his work to the scientific world. It will take a year, perhaps two."

The reporter made an impolite sound through his lips.

"I got a story, anyhow." He started away, murmuring tentatively: "Prehistoric Curse Clips Grave-Robber."

Sam Quain's harassed eyes looked around at the others.

"Really, boys," he said, "that's all. Except that I want to offer my apologies, on behalf of the expedition, for this tragic anticlimax. And I hope you will be generous in what you write about Dr. Mondrick. He was a great

man—if a trifle eccentric at times. His work, when it is finally published, will win him a secure place in the history of science."

He started to turn.

"That's all that I—that any of us—will have to say."

RELUCTANTLY, the newsmen began to scatter. Barbee pushed forward, seized Sam Quain's arm. Did the tall explorer really shudder as if in horror from his touch? Or was that imagination? Barbee led him aside.

"What's it all about, Sam?" he demanded. "Your deflation of the suspense was pretty good, maybe—but not nearly so good as the build-up. You were all scared spitless. What were—*are* you afraid of?"

Dark and haunted, Sam Quain's blue eyes looked into his. They searched him, Barbee thought, as penetratingly as if they sought to discover some monstrous thing in human guise. Sam Quain shuddered again.

"Why, we were all afraid of exactly what happened," he said. "We knew that Mondrick was ill, but he insisted on making his announcement. Of course, he himself was desperately afraid of the attack."

Barbee shook his head.

"Sam, that doesn't quite make sense—and you know it. It's a fact that asthmatic attacks are almost never fatal." His voice begged. "What has happened, Sam—to all of you? Why can't you be frank with me?"

"Don't be a fool, Will." Sam Quain's voice sounded both frightened and impatient. "Naturally, our lives have grown apart. Of course, we're still friends." His hunted eyes fled to the green box. "Now I must go. Will. We've got to arrange about Mondrick in time so we can catch the next plane west."

"But Nora's here to meet you, with Pat," Barbee protested. "We brought old Ben to meet Rex. And Nick's folks are out there. Aren't you going to see them?"

Agony darkened Quain's fear-haunted eyes.

"We'll see them." His voice was low and husky. "My God, Will, do you think we aren't human? But we can't be separated. And we've simply got to get out of New York tonight. I'll try to get a plane reservation for Nora and Pat. Sorry, Will. So long."

Barbee clutched his arm.

"One more thing—what had a cat to do with Mondrick's attack?"

"Eh?" Pale beneath the bronze, Quain started away from him. "What cat?"

"That's what I want to know."

Sam Quain's eyes searched him fearfully, desperately.

"Mondrick was allergic to cats," he said at last, jerkily. "That was the cause of his asthma. He couldn't go into the same room with one without suffering an attack." His voice was almost frantic. "Will, have you seen a cat here?"

"Yes," Barbee said. "A black kitten—"

He had been about to tell of April Bell and the kitten in the snakeskin bag. But now he saw the red-haired girl coming toward them, out of the confusion about the ambulance. God, she was beautiful—strong and quick and graceful as a jungle cat. Her green eyes met Barbee's, and she smiled. Barbee was suddenly breathless, and he felt a tingling. In a lowered, hasty voice, he finished lamely.

"It was on the dock. I just happened to notice it before the plane came in. Didn't see where it went."

Quain's dark eyes narrowed, almost suspiciously. He seemed about to speak when he saw April Bell's approach. His jaw squared. He caught his breath. It appeared to Barbee that he crouched a little, tensed himself, like a fighting man meeting a dangerous opponent.

"Well, Mr. Quain," called the girl's soft, vibrant voice. "I want to know just one thing—for the Clarendon *Clarion*, if you please. What have you got in the green box?" She glanced back at Rex and Nick, who stood watchfully beside it. "Your two minions are guarding it as if it contained the missing papers and the idol's eye!"

Sam Quain was poised like a boxer on the balls of his feet.

"Nothing so exciting," he said. "Nothing that would be of any interest to your readers, I'm sure. A few old bones, perhaps. A few odds and ends of rubbish that were discarded before the dawn of history."

Her laugh was a tinkle of mockery.

"Do you expect us to believe—"

"Excuse me," broke in Sam Quain desperately. "I must go."

He left them with a determined stride toward Nick and Rex and the strong green box. Old Ben Chittum came limping up at the same time and shook his handsome grandson's hand. Stout Mama Spivak came sobbing to embrace her thin, spectacled Nick, and Papa Spivak hugged them both.

Nora Quain met Sam. He kissed her hungrily and then lifted little Pat in his arms. Pat was laughing now. Suddenly she found a handkerchief and scrubbed furiously at the tear stains under her eyes. Nora tried to draw Sam aside. But he led her into the confusion of greetings about the green box, sat down on it, took Pat on one knee and Nora on the other.

Mama Spivak, with Nick still in her arms, abruptly began to wail piercingly.

"MAYBE there's nothing in the green box but what he said." April Bell spoke in a musing voice. "But they would all gladly die with old Mondrick just to protect it." Her green eyes seemed to peer far away. "It would be strange," she whispered faintly, "if they did!"

Something made Barbee shudder again. He stared at the sleek white wolfskin. He thought again of the hunch. He couldn't help wondering about the black kitten. There was just a very slight—but very uncomfortable—possibility that April Bell was an extremely adroit murderess.

It appeared that the air-borne protein molecules from a kitten's fur had caused a man's death, precisely as a strangler's cord would have done. And this girl was responsible for the rather puzzling presence of the kitten.

It startled Barbee, when he looked automatically for the snakeskin bag, to see that it was gone. The girl seemed to follow his eyes. Looking down at her empty, red-nailed hands, she cried:

"My bag! Must have mislaid it in the excitement. It's one that Aunt Agatha gave me. And there was a silver pin in it that's a family heirloom. I simply must find it. Will you help me look, Barbee?"

Barbee followed her back toward the departing ambulance. Somehow it didn't much surprise him when they found no trace of the snakeskin bag. April Bell was simply too streamlined and efficient and intensely awake to mislay anything. But, then, what *had* happened to the bag?

At last she slipped up a white fur sleeve and looked at a diamond-studded watch.

"Thanks, Barbee," she cooed. "But let's give it up. Probably somebody cut it off my arm in the crowd after I found Aunt Agatha and gave her little Fifi." Barbee had seen it in her hands after she came back, but he didn't say so. "Now I've got to run and phone my story. I can just catch the final. Forgive me if I scoop you."

The *Clarion* was Clarendon's evening paper. The *Star*, with twice the circulation, held the morning field. Barbee's deadline was midnight, New York time—which left him space to fill out some of the very puzzling gaps

in the story of Dr. Paul Mondrick's fatally interrupted announcement. April herself, he felt, was his most promising lead.

" 'For the whole story, read the *Star,*' " he quoted his publisher's slogan, and grinned. "Shall I be seeing you later?"

Barbee was suddenly uncertain whether he wanted to see the red-haired girl again because he was a little afraid she was a murderess, or because he hoped very much that she wasn't.

For a moment April looked sober, puzzled. Then her white teeth flashed in a friendly, easy smile. "If you like. When shall we say?"

"How's for dinner?" Barbee suggested. "Say at eight? If the boys really take the next plane with their mysterious green box, I'll have to look after old Ben and the other relatives."

"Especially Nora Quain!" Her green eyes mocked him. "At eight."

She gave him the name of her uptown hotel and briefly took his hand. Her touch was electric. To say that was trite. Yet Barbee felt that something had flowed from her strong fingers into him, something that numbed him with a queer chill and set his blood to racing.

She awakened something in him. Watching the white fur glide away, he felt taller. He filled his lungs and drew down his chin and flexed his fingers, conscious of his long-neglected muscular strength. He wondered how he would feel if he found she really were a murderess.

MAMA SPIVAK was still wailing thinly, with papa and Nick trying vainly to console her.

"It's all right, mama." The little tailor patted her plump, quivering shoulder. "Nicky should come home when he has such great things to do? He knows how you cleaned and cooked till the whole flat is shining and rich with good smells. The love is what matters. Come, mama."

"I should mind the food, the clean house," she sobbed. "No, papa. It is this awful thing that they have found. This horror in the green box that my Nicky won't even speak of. I'm afraid, papa. It killed Dr. Mondrick. I'm afraid it will take my Nicky, too."

"Nonsense, mama." Nick tried to laugh at her. "You're just an old silly."

But his laugh wasn't very successful.

Nora Quain's golden head was buried in Sam's faded khaki shoulder. Pat, on the other knee, was blinking as she urged:

"Now, mother, don't *you* cry."

Old Ben Chittum was grinning at Rex.

"Sure, it's all right, kid. Don't worry about me. I got my return ticket and everything. I just hoped we could see the old town together, that's all. Forget it, kid. Hell, I'm spry as a spring lamb!"

Barbee waited until April Bell's wolf jacket had been out of sight for five minutes. Then he followed a hunch. He walked to the trash container

at the end of the pier and fumbled under discarded newspapers and candy wrappings and a crushed sailor straw.

It was the same sort of hunch that had led him to a hundred stories before. Called on to explain it, he might have said that it was merely logical reasoning, working below the level of his conscious mind.

Under the broken hat he found the snakeskin bag.

Two ends of red ribbon fluttered beside the clasp, crushed and twisted as if they had been wrapped around tugging fingers. Barbee snapped open the bag. Inside was the small, limp body of the black kitten.

The red ribbon, tied in a slip noose, was drawn so tight that the head seemed almost cut off. The pink mouth was open, the tiny tongue exposed. "Aunt Agatha's" kitten had been very efficiently garroted.

A drop of blood on the white silk lining led Barbee to something else. Turning the kitten over, he found an odd silver pin almost buried in the tangled black fur. The ornament part was shaped into a little running wolf, set with a tiny eye of green malachite. The pin part was thrust into the kitten's body. A drop of dark blood followed when he drew it out. He thought it must have pierced the heart.

III.

Barbee had no technical knowledge of what are termed the occult sciences. It wasn't necessary. The black kitten and Dr. Paul Mondrick had both died at very nearly the same time, in precisely the same way. April Bell had killed the kitten. Had she thereby—ignoring whatever part had been played by that bio-chemical magic called allergy—intended murder?

He couldn't help an uneasy suspicion that she had.

But what was he to do about it? He looked back down the dock. Sam Quain was tenderly untwining little Pat's arms from around his neck. Rex and Nick had picked up the green box again. Mama Spivak was wailing louder, and Papa Spivak was trying vainly to lead her away.

For a moment Barbee felt an impulse to take the snakeskin bag and its disquieting contents to Sam. But the witchcraft angle made it seem absurd. He felt annoyed at the rather inexplicable distance in Sam's manner.

And he was reluctant to have April Bell publicly involved—so soon, anyhow. He was looking forward with a curious mixture of eagerness and apprehension to their date. He wanted desperately to know more about her—to end the appalled uncertainty that tortured him.

His mind was made up. He wiped the blood from the silver pin on the lining of the bag and dropped the pin in his pocket. He closed the bag again, with the kitten inside, and buried it once more under the broken hat. Briefly he wondered what the refuse collectors would think, and supposed that they were used to such minor mysteries.

The damp wind, as he stepped away from the container, set him to shiv-

ering again. The gray dusk seemed suddenly thicker. He mopped his sweaty hands and heard a ripping sound, and looked down to see that he had torn his handkerchief in two.

THE BAR in April Bell's hotel was a semicircular glass-walled room, with indirect lighting that was annoyingly red. The seats were green leather and chromium. The whole effect was *moderne*, mechanistic, disturbing—perhaps it was intended, Barbee thought, to goad unsuspecting patrons into buying another drink.

April Bell flashed her scarlet smile at him from a tiny black table under the red-glowing wall. She looked relaxed, as if this disquieting atmosphere did not affect her. Indeed, her face reflected a satisfaction that was almost feline.

Her rather daring evening dress was a green that intensified the eager green of her eyes. Barbee hadn't even thought of the matter of dinner jacket or tails and for a moment he was uncomfortably aware of his gray year-old business suit. But the girl didn't seem to mind, and he swiftly forgot, in his instant appreciation of the delicious curves that the white-wolf coat had hidden. She was maddeningly—and dangerously—desirable.

"May I have a dacquari?" she asked.

Barbee ordered two dacquaris.

Looking at the sheen of her red hair, the glow of her green eyes, the eager, vital animation of her perfect body, it was hard to remember his plan of campaign. The ring of her voice made him want desperately to forget that he suspected her of murder.

Of course, he could not forget. A frantic unrest in him, an agonizing conflict of desperate hope and vaguely dreadful fear, would not be stilled until he knew. He had tried, in the taxi, to map out a plan of action.

Motivation, clearly, was the key. If it were true that she knew nothing of Mondrick, had no reason to wish him injury, then the whole thing became fantastic nonsense. Even if the kitten had caused the fatal attack, it would be no more than accidental homicide, of a form that would scarcely concern the law.

Barbee didn't like to consider the other alternative. He didn't want to find a motive, and he shrank from thinking what it might be. Uneasily he remembered Mondrick's "secret enemy," awaiting the coming of a "Black Messiah." Sam Quain's attempt to explain that away hadn't been too convincing.

Suppose April was a member of some strange conspiracy? Mondrick had got evidence about the aims of the conspirators and brought it back from Asia in the green box. Taking desperate precautions—which only emphasized the vastness of the danger—he had attempted to broadcast a warning. Before he could say anything definite he had fallen dead.

And April Bell had killed him. That suspicion haunted Barbee.

But the whole idea was fantastic. In a world which afforded such effi-

cient means of homicide as Tommy-guns, no really dangerous conspirators were going to depend on the protein dust from a black kitten carried across the victim's path—or even upon a strangling cord around the kitten's throat, and a pin thrust through its heart. That is, unless—

BARBEE SHOOK his head. The longer he looked at those vague improbabilities, the more unpleasant they became. He tried to devote himself to the more attractive prospect of cocktails, and dinner afterward, with the most fascinating woman he had ever met.

What if April Bell were a witch?

After all, he was pretty much fed up with life. Eighty or a hundred hours a week on Preston Troy's dirty yellow rag for forty-two dollars. He had been drinking a quart of whiskey a day. Witchcraft—even insanity—might be a more exciting escape. Particularly if the witch were April Bell.

She looked at him over her dacquari. Her cool green eyes seemed to hold a provocative challenge. Her cool voice said softly:

"Well—Barbee?"

Their glasses chimed together and he said:

"To—this evening." He leaned across the tiny octagonal table. "I want to know about you. Your family. Your friends. Where you've been and what you've done. What you dream about. And what you like for breakfast."

Her red lips curved with a slow feline smile.

"A woman's mystery is her charm."

He couldn't help noticing the even white strength of her perfect teeth. He tried to remember Poe's weird story—something about a man who was haunted by a terrific compulsion to pull his sweetheart's teeth. He started to lift his glass, but a shudder made it tremble in his hand.

He set it down again and said: "But too much mystery is alarming. I'm really afraid of you, Miss Bell."

"April, to you."

The smile on her white, mobile face was slightly malicious. He thought that her green eyes were laughing at him. He had thought that he knew about women—altogether too much about them. But she baffled him.

"I've tried to build up an illusion." Her cool voice seemed faintly mocking. "It makes me very happy to think that you have accepted it. Do you want me to shatter it?"

"I do," he said soberly.

She nodded, and red lights shimmered in her hair.

"All right, then," she cooed. "For you, Will Barbee, I'll drop my painted veil."

She set down her glass and leaned toward him with her elbows on the tiny table. The curves of her shoulders were near him, and faintly he caught the odor of her body. It was a light, clean fragrance, and he was glad that it had escaped the advertising crusade of the soap manufacturers. Somehow

it made him think of dark, cool woods, of pine-scented mountain air. Her husky voice was low and sober.

"I'm just a simple farmer's daughter," she told him. "I was born in Clarendon County. My parents had a dairy six miles south of town. I used to walk half a mile to the highway to catch the school bus."

Her lips made a quick half smile. "Does that shatter the illusion sufficiently?"

Barbee shook his head. "That hardly dents it," he said. "Go on."

Her white, expressive face looked troubled.

"Please, Will," she protested. "I'd rather not. Not tonight, anyhow. I don't want to ruin the illusion, really."

"No danger." His voice was almost grim. "Do go on. You see, I'm still afraid."

Her green eyes studied him mysteriously.

"It gets a little sordid," she said. "But—if you really want me to go on?"

"Please—you must."

Her mobile face made a grimace of distaste.

"My parents didn't get on—that's all, really." Her low voice was forced and jerky. "My father—well, I'll skip unpleasant details. When I was seven, mother took me to California. He kept the other children. There wasn't any alimony. Mother took her own name back. She worked for a living. Stenographer. Movie extra. A few character bits. It was pretty rough sledding for her. She did everything for me. She wanted to protect me from the same sort of thing. She made me—well, a she-wolf. Through all those years she managed to keep her insurance paid up. I had a few thousand dollars when she died. By the time that's gone—"

Her cool green eyes searched his face.

"That's the picture, Will—a ruthless beast of prey." She drained her cocktail—a gesture that seemed nervous, perhaps defiant. "How do you like it?"

SHIFTING uneasily before her penetrating glance, Barbee was grateful for the waiter's approach. He ordered two more dacquaris.

In a voice that held a faint bitter mockery—perhaps of herself—April Bell asked: "Does that make you any less afraid?"

Barbee contrived to grin.

"As a beast of prey," he told her, "your equipment is splendid. I only wish that reporters were fair financial game." His voice grew sober. "But it's something else that I'm afraid of."

He thought that her white, perfect body imperceptibly tensed, that her greenish eyes alertly narrowed—even that the faint fragrant scent of her now carried some subtle warning—as if she had been an actual thing of prey, crouching, wary and deadly. Her instant smile didn't quite erase that startled impression.

"Will!" Her voice had a vital, urgent tension. "What *are* you afraid of?"

Barbee drained the rest of his own drink. His fingers drummed nervously on the table—how large and gnarled and hairy his hand appeared beside hers. A reckless impulse moved him. His mind rebelled against the intolerable conflict of frantic hope and desperate doubt.

"April—"

He paused and gulped and caught his breath. Her green eyes watched him, remote and narrowed and alert, as if she had already heard what he was going to say.

"April—it's about what happened today." He leaned across the little table, trembling, desperate, accusing. "You killed that black kitten on the dock. You did it to cause the death of Dr. Mondrick."

Barbee expected a violent denial. He was prepared to face slashing anger. A bewildered lack of comprehension was what he had hoped for. He was completely at a loss when the girl covered her face with her hands, propped on her elbows, and began quietly sobbing.

He stared at the red glory of her head, uncertain what to do next. He sensed her pain and despair. A sharp knife of contrition was twisted in his breast. He couldn't endure tears.

"April—really—" he floundered, "I didn't mean—"

He subsided while the stony-faced waiter came up, set down two dacquaris, and went away with his dollar bill and his empty glass. He wanted desperately to touch April Bell's bright head and her white, trembling shoulder, yet somehow didn't quite dare. He wanted to soothe her hurt. Suddenly he didn't care what she was or what she had done. Instead, a tremendous, excited curiosity to know how and why she had done it rose in him.

"Please, April," he begged faintly. "I'm sorry."

She lifted her head and looked at him out of her wet, green eyes. They were huge and dark and solemn. Her red head nodded slightly in a tired and hopeless way.

"So you know." It was a dull, bitter statement.

Barbee reached out to take her hands, but she drew them away from him.

"I don't know anything," he said. "This is all a nightmare. I'm just trying to find something I can understand. I—" He blinked and made a noisy gulp. "I didn't want to hurt you, April. I like you—desperately. But—well, Mondrick's dead."

She found a handkerchief in the green leather bag that matched the gown and her eyes, and dabbed away her tears. She sipped at the cocktail, and it trembled a little in her fingers. At last she said, in a low, grave voice:

"Yes, Will—I am a witch."

Barbee half rose, sat down again and nervously tossed off his cocktail. He blinked at her and shook his head savagely. He caught his breath and opened his mouth and shut it again. At last he demanded:

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Just that, Will," she said soberly. "I didn't tell you what my parents quarreled about. But it was that. You see, mother was my father's second wife, much younger than he. I don't think she ever loved him—I never really knew how she came to marry him. Mother had been in love with another man. I know my father suspected that I wasn't really his.

"He was a stern, religious man. He used to preach on market Saturdays, on the corner of the courthouse square in Clarendon. He was a fanatic—perhaps a little insane. His righteousness could be monstrously cruel."

April's voice was very low. She watched his face, as if to measure the effect of her words. Barbee had a queer, numbed feeling in the pit of his stomach; it was amazingly like the effect of a tremendous slug of whiskey; numbed, yet with a foreknowledge of warmth to come. He nodded anxiously.

Her white, troubled face smiled with faint relief.

"You see, I was a precocious child. I learned very rapidly. I could sense what people were going to do, and things that were going to happen. I think I was unusually pretty. Anyhow, my father's own children were jealous—always taking sides with him against mother and me. It happened that mother and father were both dark-haired, which must have increased his suspicions. I was just five years old when he first called me a witch child and whipped me."

Her green eyes were dry. To Barbee they seemed hard as emeralds, bitter with an old and unforgotten hate. Her lips, beyond the scarlet bows, were pale. Her hurried voice was dry and bitter—he thought it was like a parching desert wind.

"My father hated me," she said. "And his children did. Because I was different. Because I was quicker. Because I could do things they couldn't. Yes—because I was already a witch!"

Her head made a sharp little nod.

"They stood against me. It was only natural for me to try to use my gifts to defend myself. Already I knew about witches from the Bible—my father used to read a chapter at every mealtime before he would let us eat. I asked questions about what witches could do—I learned a lot from the old midwife who came when my married sister had a child. She was a queer old woman! And I tried to practice the things I learned.

"Just small things, mostly, in a child's way. My half-brother had a dog named Tige. For some reason Tige hated me. He always growled when I tried to touch him—my father said that was another sign that I was a witch. One day Tige bit me. Harry laughed and called me a witch. I told him I was going to put a spell on Tige and kill him. I did my best. I made up a little chant and gathered hairs out of his blanket and spit on them and put them in the stove. Three weeks later Tige went mad and father had to shoot him."

"Coincidence," muttered Barbee.

"Maybe." April Bell's white face was lighted with a brief half smile, but the shadow of bitterness came back. "But I believed in my power. Harry did. So did my father when he was told. He whipped me again."

With a trembling hand she emptied her glass.

"That seemed savagely unjust. While he was whipping me I screamed that I would get even. As soon as he let me go I tried it. I went to the dairy and pulled hairs out of the three best cows and the prize bull. I spit on them and buried them behind the barn and made a chant.

"One day—maybe a month afterward—the bull dropped dead."

"Coincidence," Barbee whispered faintly.

Her scarlet lips twisted to a wry, slight smile.

"The veterinarian said that it was hemorrhagic septicemia. The three cows died, too, as well as a yearling heifer and two calves. My father remembered the threat I had screamed. He whipped me until I confessed that I tried to kill the cattle."

Glazed and hard, her green eyes were looking down at her empty glass. She was twirling it with tense, white, red-nailed fingers. The thin stem snapped. The bowl of the glass crashed on the floor. Without seeming to notice, she went on:

"That was a dreadful night. My father sent the other children over to my sister's house. There were just he and mother and me. He stamped up and down the floor and shouted questions at me, and read from the Bible by the light of the coal-oil lamp. Again and again he read that terrible line: *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.*

"It went on all night. He would make us kneel and pray, and he would walk the floor and sob and curse me; he would jerk me out of my mother's arms and whip me again, and then he would read out of the Bible.

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

April Bell was silent for a little time. She pushed the broken stem of the glass away from her. Barbee saw a tiny red drop on her finger.

"He would have killed me, too, if it hadn't been for my mother. He nearly did, as it was. It was weeks before I could walk again. Mother fought him in the end. She knocked him out with the churn dasher and took me away. That was when we went to California."

Barbee was a little startled to find that the waiter had removed the broken glass and set two fresh dacquaris before them. The girl lifted hers thirstily. He sipped at his own, carefully held himself from interrupting.

"I never knew what mother believed," she answered the question he had not asked. "She loved me. She only made me promise that I would never try to make another spell. And I didn't so long as she lived."

She finished the drink, set down her glass.

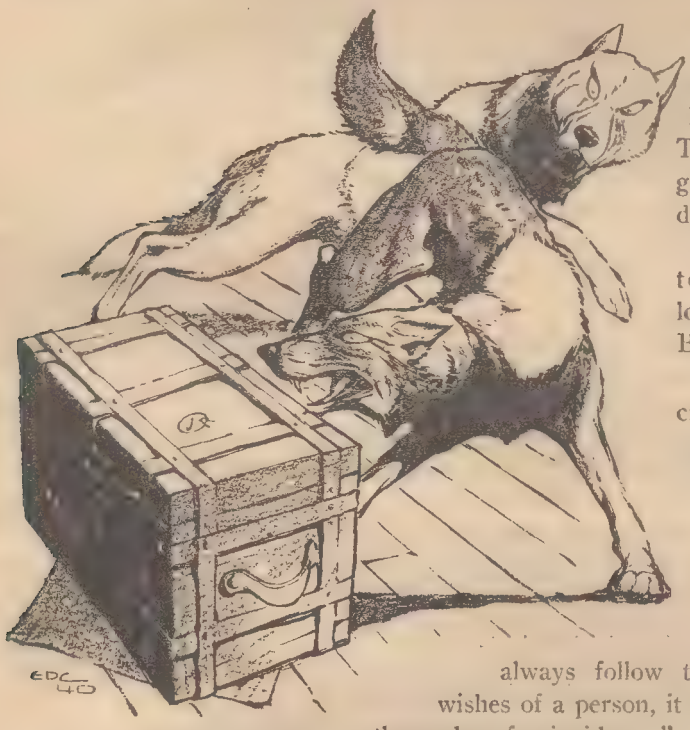
"Mother was all right. She lived for me. I think she almost forgot what had happened. I know she wanted to forget. It would have shocked her horribly to know what I was—what I really am."

April Bell's green eyes were liquid now, dark and queerly eager. "I kept my promise not to work any more spells," her low voice said. "But that didn't stop my awareness of the powers growing and awakening within me. It didn't keep me from knowing what people thought, and foreseeing things that were going to happen."

"The old reporter's nose for news," Barbee murmured.

She shook her bright head solemnly.

"There were more things than that. I didn't work any spells—not consciously. But once at school a girl won a music scholarship that I had set my heart on. I knew that she had cheated to get it. I couldn't help hating her. That winter she got ill. If she had died—"



Black and intense, her eyes looked straight at Barbee.

"Another coincidence, you can say. But there were other incidents almost as serious." Her voice dropped. "When such coincidences always follow the acts and the wishes of a person, it gets to be beyond the realm of coincidence."

Barbee nodded. After a while he remembered to breathe again. At last he said: "Yes, I guess it is."

The eyes of April Bell were almost pleading.

"I didn't ask for it," she said soberly. "I was born this way."

Barbee drummed uncertainly on the table again. He saw the waiter coming and waved him impatiently away. "Look here," he said uneasily. "Do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

She shook her head wearily. "Now that I've told you, what does anything matter?"

"There are things that might matter a good deal—to you and me." Her green eyes watched him dully, but this time she let him take her hand. Ear-

nestly he asked: "Have you ever talked about this thing to a doctor—a specialist?"

She nodded apathetically.

"After mother died I went to Dr. Glenn. Archer Glenn, you know, at Clarendon."

"I know." Barbee nodded. "Once I interviewed Glenn—wrote up Glennhaven for the special medical edition of the *Star*. Glennhaven is supposed to be about the best private mental hospital in the country."

"I was a patient there for two years," April told him. "A friend in Clarendon persuaded me to go."

BARBEE TRIED to smother an instant jealous desire to know about that "friend." His fingers tightened on April Bell's cool, tense hand. He asked: "What did Glenn say?"

Her face reflected a faint defiant amusement.

"Glenn doesn't believe in witchcraft," she said. "He thinks that everything in the universe can be explained on the basis that two and two make four. If you put any kind of spell on anything, he told me, and wait long enough, something is sure to happen to it. He used big words to tell me that I was stringing myself—that I am a little bit insane. A paranoiac."

Barbee exhaled a long, uneasy breath and moved uncertainly. A tired darkness was in her eyes. Slowly she drew her cold hand out of his fingers.

"You think so, too."

He caught his breath and gripped the edges of the little table. "My God!" he whispered explosively. "It would be no wonder, after what you've lived through!"

He felt a great surge of pity, a burning anger against the old misunderstanding that had forced her to accept such delusions. He wanted to protect her, to help lead her back toward complete sanity. His throat was choked. He coughed to hide his feelings. Too much show of pity would only offend her.

In a quiet, level voice she said: "But I know I'm not insane."

So, Barbee understood, did all lunatics. He needed time to think. He signaled the waiter and ordered two more dacquaris and looked at his watch.

"What time is it?" said April. "I'm hungry as a wolf!"

"It is getting late," Barbee said. "But there's one more thing I've got to ask about." He hesitated, and the wary, dangerous alertness came into her face again. In a heavy and reluctant voice, he said: "You did kill the black kitten on the dock?"

"I did."

His hands gripped the table until the knuckles showed white.

"And you did it to cause the death of Dr. Mondrick?"

Her bright head nodded slightly.

"And he died."

Her calm matter-of-fact tone made Barbee cold. Her watchful, green

eyes were flatly opaque. Her face was a white wax mask. He couldn't guess what she thought or what she felt. The bridge of confidence was gone, and it left a chasm of peril between them.

"Please, April—"

His voice quivered with sympathy for her, in the defiant loneliness he knew she felt. But his feeling didn't penetrate her hostile citadel. Barbee dropped to a note as cool and grave as hers had been, asking: "Why did you want to kill him?"

Across that tiny table her low and toneless voice was as distant as if it had come from a far-off fortress tower.

"Because I was afraid."

Barbee's eyes widened.

"Afraid of what—if you didn't even know him? Of course, I had an old grudge against him—for shutting me out of his classes. But he was harmless. Just an archaeologist digging up old bones."

"I know what he was doing." The voice of April Bell was hard and faint and remote. "You see, I wanted to know about myself. I've read about everything that has been published on such cases as mine."

Her eyes were hard and flat as polished malachite.

"Mondrick was an authority on witchcraft. On the history of the witch persecutions, and a great deal more besides. He had studied the beliefs of every primitive people. He wrote a monograph analyzing the myths of Greece as racial memories of conflict and interbreeding with a superior alien race. He dug up graves and measured skulls and studied old inscriptions. He studied differences in the people of today—tested their blood and measured their skulls and analyzed their dreams. He was an authority on ESP before Rhine ever thought of it."

"That's all true. So what?" asked Barbee.

"Mondrick got very cautious in what he wrote," her far-off voice went on. "Then, a dozen years ago he quit publishing anything at all. But he had already written too much. I knew what he was doing."

April Bell paused at the waiter's approach, automatically sipped at her drink. This made three, Barbee thought—no, it was four. She held them well enough. When the waiter was gone, she resumed in the same flat voice:

"Mondrick believed in witches."

Barbee started. "Nonsense! He was a scientist."

"And still he believed in witches," she said. "That's what frightened me. He had spent all his life trying to put witchcraft on a scientific basis. And I knew—from the way everything happened, from Mondrick's first remarks—that he had done it.

"Most people don't believe." Her voice was dry, with a whisper of mockery in it now. "That is our protection, for we are the enemies of peo-

ple. You can see why that has to be. Because we are different, because we have powers that are greater than men have—and still not great enough!"

With that a spark of savage and desperate hostility leaped in her green eyes. In a moment it was gone. But Barbee was feeling that same chill again, and deliberately he drained his cocktail.

"Mondrick was trying to expose us—so that men could destroy us. You can see that, Will. Perhaps he had invented a scientific test to identify witches. Years ago, I remember, he wrote a scientific paper on the correlation of blood groups and introversion. 'Introvert' is one of the harmless scientific words he used when he was writing about witches."

The hard, blank look was gone from her eyes. Perhaps the alcohol had affected her, after all, to dissolve the barriers of normal reserve. Now her eyes were almost luminously green, urgently appealing.

"Don't you see, Will, I was fighting for my life? Mondrick was like my father—like all men must be. Men are not to blame. But, am I?" Her white throat pulsed as she swallowed. "It's just the way things are. Always, everywhere, men must follow that old law: *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.*"

Her smooth, bare shoulders wearily shrugged.

"That's it, Will." Her dark eyes were mutely questioning. "You've got to see I had to do it. I made a spell—and it worked."

Barbee sat back abruptly—as if to break some fascination that her words had cast upon him.

"You were alone?" he demanded.

The pleading went out of her eyes; again they were hard and flat and watchful, like the eyes of a hunted animal. Her face went white around the scarlet lips. Her voice once more was coldly toneless, distant.

"I was alone," she said.

Barbee leaned forward, grimly intent.

"Mondrick spoke of a 'secret enemy.' Did he mean—witches?"

"I believe he did," she said.

"Do you know any others?"

He thought that her answer was a fractional second delayed. Her eyes were opaque green screens. Her tense, waxlike face showed nothing.

"No." Suddenly her whole body trembled, so that he knew she was fighting back tears. In the same low, flat voice she said: "Must you persecute me?"

"I'm sorry," Barbee said. "But now, when you have told me so much, you must tell me everything. How else can I judge?" His hands closed hard on the edges of the table. "Do you know what Mondrick meant when he spoke of the Black Messiah?"

He half glimpsed, for a tiny instant, a queer little smile, too swiftly come and gone to be sure.

"No," she said faintly. "Is that all?"

"One more question, please." Barbee's gray eyes strove to pierce those

screens of malachite. "Do you know what proteins Dr. Mondrick was allergic to?"

Her wary hostility gave way to a genuine bewilderment.

"Allergic?" Her voice was puzzled. "That's got something to do with indigestion, hasn't it? Why, no, I don't. Really, Will, I never saw him before today."

"Thank God!" breathed Will Barbee.

He stood up, filled his lungs again, smiled at her.

"Forgive me for grilling you, April," he begged. "But I simply had to ask those things."

She remained seated, and her white face did not reflect his smile.

"You may go if you wish," she said.

"Go?" he protested. "Lady, you have promised me the evening. We've a dinner waiting. Dances. The Fair, if you like—this is almost the last night. You don't *want* me to go?"

A little eager light came into her eyes.

"You mean," she whispered softly, "after all I've told you—"

Barbee grinned, and suddenly laughed. His tension had somehow evaporated completely. "If you're a witch, I'm completely under your spells."

She rose with a smile that grew slowly radiant.

"Thank you, Will," she smiled. "But, please—just for tonight—won't you help me forget that I'm—what I am?"

Barbee grinned happily.

"I'll try, angel!"

IV.

THEY STAYED at the Fair until closing time, dancing their way from nation to nation. April Bell danced gloriously, with the tireless grace of some wild thing. She seemed to forget that she might be anything except an extremely gorgeous redhead. And Barbee did—the most of the time. But the flash of her teeth and the green mystery of her eyes shocked him more than once with disquieting recollection. It was late when they got out of a taxi at the door of her hotel.

They lingered on the sidewalk.

"You know, April"—Barbee watched the taxi pull away and looked back into her white, eager face—"I've a queer feeling about you." His voice was slow and wondering. "As if you made me remember things I never knew—as if you woke something in me that has always been sleeping."

Her eyes sparkled with a pleasant malice, and her velvet voice hummed the refrain of a song to which they had danced: "Maybe It's Love."

Maybe it was. Yet he was still afraid—not of her, perhaps, but of the unknown power she stirred in himself. He wanted desperately to suggest something that would make it unnecessary for them to part. He thought that she was waiting, thought eagerness was betrayed in the parting of her

scarlet lips. But that alarm made him strained and awkward. Against his will, he said good night.

She was flying back to Clarendon. He was leaving by rail, too early to see her again. She would be glad to have him call her in Clarendon. She gave him the number of her apartment, in the Trojan Arms.

Barbee's employer owned the Trojan Arms, and he knew that the cheapest apartment in the building leased for a hundred a month. For a cub reporter, he reflected rather grimly, April Bell was doing very nicely.

He promised to call, and reluctantly let her go.

A few hours later he was on the *Streamliner*, rolling back toward the Middle West. He still had the little silver pin that he had found in the black kitten's heart—no doubt it belonged to April Bell, but he had felt its return too delicate a matter to approach. That endless afternoon, with the sharp little throb in his head keeping time to the rhythm of the wheels, he turned the pin for a long time in his palm, staring—

Wondering—

The tiny malachite eye was the same color as the eyes of April Bell—when she was in her most wary and alarming mood. The fine detail of the silver wolf's limbs and snarling head had been cut with a careful skill, and it was dark with age. A very odd trinket, it was cut with a wiry, lean-lined type of workmanship he had never before seen.

Remembering the white-wolf coat, Barbee wondered what the symbol meant to April Bell. Suddenly he had the disconcerting impression that the malachite eye had winked at him, maliciously. He was almost asleep. He was hypnotizing himself with the damned pin. He resisted a sudden violent impulse to throw it out of the car.

That was insanity. Of course, he was afraid of April Bell. He had always been afraid of women. Even the most approachable female made him a little uneasy. The more they mattered, the more afraid he was. His hunch couldn't mean anything. The pin got on his nerves just because it stood for April Bell. He would have to begin cutting down the whiskey—that was all the trouble, really.

If he threw the pin away, it would be an admission that he believed April Bell to be—actually—just what she had said. He couldn't accept that. He put the pin firmly back into his vest pocket.

His uneasy thoughts of April Bell were not so easy to put away. He was haunted with the faint but disturbing possibility that she really was—he dreaded the word—a witch. That, somehow, she had been born with a unique and dangerous mental power to twist the laws of probability. Unlikely. But was it utterly impossible?

He bought a magazine. But his mind refused to leave those disquieting channels. Why had Mondrick and his companions been so obviously terrified? They had taken elaborate precautions against disaster, clearing the dock and surrounding themselves with policemen. But disaster had struck in spite

of them. That seemed to indicate that the peril was something greater even than those four frightened men had believed.

Something much more alarming than one exotic, green-eyed redhead.

His unwilling speculations ran on. If April Bell were indeed a witch, there might very reasonably be others. The others might be more powerful and less charming to go dancing with. Perhaps they were organized, waiting for the Black Messiah to lead them in a Saturnalian rebellion.

Barbee's aching eyes had closed, and he pictured the Black Messiah. A tall, lean, commanding figure, standing amid shattered rocks, terrible in a long black robe. Barbee peered under the black hood to see if he could recognize the face—and a white skull grinned at him.

He woke with a start. He must be getting too old to drink so much and sleep so little. He rose and walked up and down the aisle, hoping that would wake him and stop the throb in his head. It didn't.

He returned to his seat. His eyes ached, and he gave up trying to read. He was bored with the bridge game two seats ahead, and the two Iowa women discussing family history across the aisle. He was desperately sleepy—

And afraid to sleep.

He couldn't understand that fear. It was a slow, creeping dread, as if he knew that the dim apprehensions that haunted him now would possess him in his sleep. But it wasn't entirely—fear. It was mingled with a frantic yearning, for some obscure and triumphant escape.

Neither could he quite understand the way he felt about April Bell. He thought he ought to feel a shocked horror of her. After all, she was either a witch or a lunatic. In one way or another she had almost certainly caused Mondrick's death. But the thing he shuddered at was the feeling she awakened in himself. She roused something frightful, chained, yet dangerous.

Desperately he tried to put her out of his mind.

At last it was time to eat. He lingered in the dining car, and then listened for an hour to a bald, seedy-looking advocate of Union Now. Even after he was in his berth he tried to read again, until his aching eyes blurred. But the first night he had played poker till dawn, and most of the last he had spent with April Bell. Sleep pressed upon him with an urgency that became resistless.

April Bell was calling to him.

Her voice came clearly across all the miles from Clarendon. It was a ringing, golden chime. It throbbed in his brain. It shimmered out of the dark in waves of pure yellow light. Then Barbee thought he could see her in some dark, far-off place.

Only she wasn't a woman.

Her urgent velvet voice was human, still. Her limpid, green eyes were the same. But she was a white she-wolf, sleek and wary and powerful. Her clear woman voice rang to him:

"Come, Will Barbee, for I need you."

He was aware of the heavy green curtains about his berth, and the steel and glass of the Pullman, and the swift, muffled click of the wheels. He knew that Clarendon was still hundreds of miles ahead.

"I'm coming," he answered, "as fast as the train will bring me."

"But there's a faster way," the white wolf called. "I can show it to you. You have my silver pin? Then take it in your hand."

In a numb, groping, sleep-drugged way, Barbee thought he fumbled for his vest in the net above him and found the tiny silver pin. Dimly he wondered how she knew he had it. For he hadn't dared to speak of it.

"Now, Will," she called across the dark, misty void between them. "You can change, as I have changed. You can run as the wolf runs, trail as the wolf trails, kill as the wolf kills. You *are* a wolf, Will. Just turn loose. Let your body flow—"

Barbee's numb fingers clutched the pin. He made a groping effort to obey. And there was a curious, painful flux of his body—as if he had twisted it into positions never assumed, had called on muscles never used. Pain smothered him in darkness.

"Keep trying, Will!" Her urgent voice stabbed through the darkness. "If you fail, you will die. But you can do it. Just let go. You are a wolf. Just let your body change—"

And suddenly he was free.

Those painful bonds had snapped. He slipped down through the green curtains and ran along the aisle. The sleepy porter, hurrying with a hot-water bottle, didn't seem to see him. He slipped through the blinds and leaped down to the weed-grown embankment.

Free—

No longer was he imprisoned in the slow, clumsy, insensitive body he had always known. Surely four nimble feet were better than two. A smothering cloak had been lifted from his senses.

Free, and swift, and strong!

He trotted ahead of the smelly, pounding train, out of the reek of wet steam and cinders and hot metal. The earth was damp under his springy pads. The night refreshed him with the clean chill of autumn. A breath of wind swept away the tarry odor of the creosoted ties and brought a symphony of farmyard and woodland odors.

He liked the aroma of the wet weeds, and even the dew that splashed his shaggy gray fur. Far ahead of the laboring train, he paused to listen to the tiny rustlings of field mice, and caught a cricket with a flash of his paw.

Elation lifted him, a clean, vibrant joy that he had never known. He lifted his muzzle toward the setting half-moon and uttered a quavering, long-drawn howl of pure delight. Somewhere beyond a dark row of trees a dog began to bark in a frightened and breathless way. He sniffed and caught the scent of that ancient enemy. His hackles lifted. Dogs would learn not to bark at him.

But the wolf bitch was calling:

"Hurry, Will—I need you."

He caught her scent, and it guided him. It was clean and fragrant as pine. The speed of his running was dreamlike. The furious barking of the angered dog was remote behind him, and lost.

CLARENDON had been hundreds of miles ahead. But the dark world flowed as he ran. In a very little time Barbee was trotting up the river road, past Trojan Hills—as Preston Troy had named his broad, rolling estate south of Clarendon and above the river valley where Troy's mills stood. The lights were out in the huge brick house, but a lantern was bobbing about the stables, where perhaps the grooms were tending a sick horse. He heard a soft, uneasy whicker, and paused to sniff the strong, pleasant pungence of horses.

Somewhere among the dark, crowded houses down near the mills a dog made one thin yelp of alarm. And the white she-wolf came trotting to meet him on the highway. Her green eyes were shining with an eagerness of welcome. She touched his muzzle, and the cold kiss shook him with an electric thrill. He sniffed the clean, sweet fragrance of her.

"Come, Will." She sprang away from him. "It's late, and we have a thing to do."

He hadn't realized that so much of the night had fled. But the streets were deserted, save for occasional swift-driven cars. Most of the signals were dead. Only the one at the corner of the campus, where Center crossed the highway, was blinking a warning yellow. Dew had fallen here, but still the cold, damp air was laden with the reek of asphalt and gasoline and rubber and half-burned cigarettes and human beings.

Barbee ran after the fleet white wolf, asking: "What's this we have to do?"

She leaped out of the path of a drumming car—of course, the driver couldn't see them. Running with an easy feral grace, she looked back at Barbee. Her red tongue was hanging out of her mouth, and her fangs gleamed white. It would no longer be strange, he thought, to see her gnawing a red bone.

"It's that wooden box they brought back from Asia," she told him. "We must see what it contains tonight. And destroy anything that holds danger for us. The box is still at Sam Quain's house."

Barbee followed her through the pall of biting, sulphurous odors that drifted from the mills and the railroad yards and the chemical works across the river. They came into the cleaner air on the hills and passed the yellow-blinking signal. She turned across the campus toward Sam Quain's house.

Down the wind, Professor Schnitzler's collie began to howl.

"Why is it?" asked Barbee. "Men don't see us, but the dogs are always frightened."

The white wolf snarled toward the howling.

"The dogs have a sense for us," she said. "They are our greatest enemy

—except for Chittum and Spivak and Quain. That is why our friends in Europe are so anxious to destroy them."

The leaf-strewn grass and walks of the campus reeked with the body scent of those who had thronged it during the day, for this was registration week. It was a sharp, rancid odor, very different from the clean fragrance of the she-wolf. A suffocating pall of hydrogen sulphide lay down the wind from the chemistry lab. A pleasant pungence of manure drifted up from the model farm of the agriculture department in the valley. The white tower of the new Anthropology Hall was enveloped in the turpentine-and-linseed-oil smell of new paint.

The white wolf paused beside the tower, sensitive ears pricked up alertly.

"They are planning to bring the box here tomorrow," she said. "They know that we are against them. They are sure to do whatever they can to guard themselves. They will try to use whatever weapons they have in the box. That is why we must strike tonight."

They came to the little white bungalow on College Street that Sam Quain had built for Nora when they were married. Barbee knew it well. The she-wolf led him in a wary circuit of the building, her fine ears lifted, listening and sniffing uneasily. Barbee caught the scent of little Pat from the sand pile where she had played, and sprang before the white wolf with a growl in his throat.

"They mustn't be harmed," he protested. "They're friends of mine —Sam and Nora and Pat. The best friends I have."

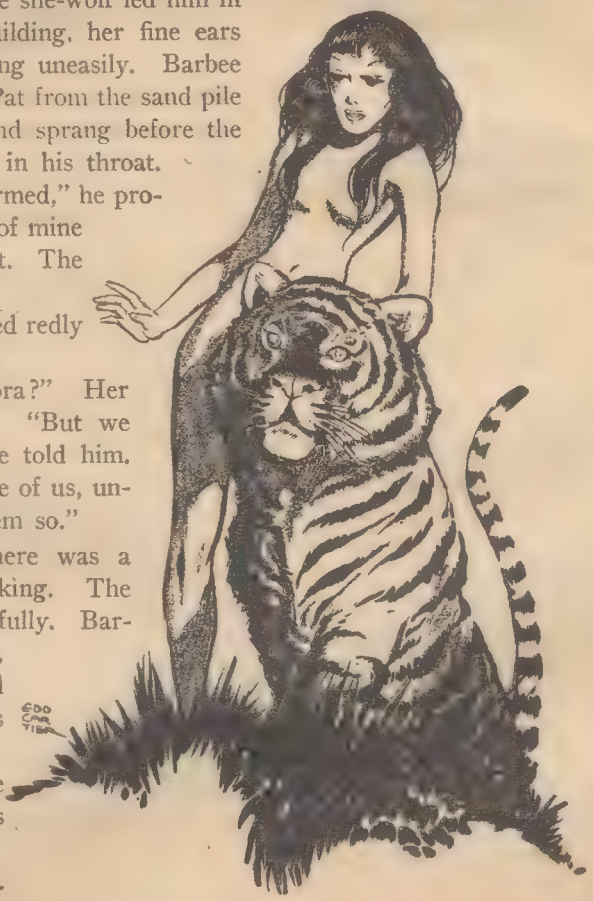
The wolf bitch grinned redly over her hanging tongue.

"Both Sam and Nora?" Her green eyes mocked him. "But we needn't injure them," she told him. "Men are usually unaware of us, unless we wish to make them so."

Inside the house there was a sudden small, shrill barking. The she-wolf leaped back fearfully. Barbee shuddered with a deep, ungovernable alarm and he felt his gray hackles rise.

"That's Pat's little dog," he said. "She calls it Jiminy Cricket."

The she-wolf snarled.



"We must kill it."

"Not little Pat's dog," Barbee protested. "She'd be heartbroken."

A SCREEN DOOR banged. A little fluff of white fur hurtled out into the back yard, barking furiously. The she-wolf sprang away apprehensively. It leaped at Barbee. He tried to cuff it away, and sharp little teeth grazed his paw. The pain woke something savage in him, a latent, deadly fury that drowned his regard for little Pat.

He crouched and leaped, and his great jaws closed. He lifted the bit of fur and shook it, and the thin yelping ceased. He tossed it upon the sand pile and licked the evil-tasting dog hair off his fangs.

The white wolf was trembling.

"I didn't know about the dog," she said fearfully. "They are a danger to us. They aided men to conquer us once." She moved toward the back door. "Now we must hurry. It will soon be dawn."

Barbee tried to forget that little Pat would cry.

"The dawn is dangerous?"

"I had forgotten to warn you," said the green-eyed wolf. "Never let the day find you changed. There is a deadly power in the rays of the sun." Her deft, slender paw opened the screen. "We've no time to waste."

Barbee led the way into the stuffy house. The air was heavy with the odors of Sam, Nora and Pat. He could hear Sam's strong, even breathing from their room, and Nora's, slower and more quiet. Pat turned uneasily on her bed in the nursery and whimpered in her sleep:

"Come back to me, Jiminy."

But she didn't quite wake.

The box was in Sam Quain's study. Barbee rose against the door and tried the knob with his supple paws. But the door was locked. The key must be in Sam Quain's trousers. He moved stealthily toward the bedroom.

"Wait," the white wolf told him. "There's another thing you should know. Our changed bodies are a special kind of matter—that is why men can't see us. We can—to the degree that we possess the mental gift—open a way through doors and walls. I don't know how a scientist would explain it. But matter becomes transparent to our passage as glass is to light."

Her green eyes fixed on the lower panels of the door. A circular spot faded in a ghostly way to make a misty-edged opening. She leaped lightly through, and Barbee sprang after her. He stopped inside with a stifled growl.

Something in the room was—deadly.

THE CLOSE air was thick with odors of tobacco and paper and ink and mothballs, and the scent of a mouse that once had dwelt behind the books. But the queer, strong smell that frightened Barbee came from the battered, iron-bound wooden box sitting on the floor beside Sam's cluttered desk.

It was a sharp, musty reek, as of something that had moldered for a very long time underground. It was alarming in a way that he couldn't under-

stand. The white bitch was frozen in a snarl, with hatred and stunned fear in her eyes.

"It's in the box," she said faintly. "It is something that Mondrick dug out of the past to use against us. We must destroy it."

Barbee shook himself, retreated uneasily.

"I feel strange," he said. "Weak and ill—and I can't breathe. The thing in the box is poison. Let's get back out in the air."

"No," the white wolf whimpered. "We've got to destroy it—or die."

Crouching, white fur bristled, she moved upon the green box. Unwillingly, Barbee followed her. He was tense and shivering. That deadly scent was stronger. It seemed to him that a slow and insidious chill was paralyzing his body.

"Hold the padlock," the she-wolf snarled. "I think I can work it."

Fighting that chill, dead repulsion, Barbee reached the box. He dropped on his haunches, reached for the padlock with a flexible paw. A strange, icy shock numbed him, and the lock clattered back against the hasp.

"We must," the she-wolf whimpered.

Shivering, cringing as if to an invisible whip, she crept up beside him. Her graceful forefoot touched the padlock. She jerked back convulsively, and her white body stiffened. She made a sharp, tiny sound of pain, and then dropped limply to the floor.

"April!" yelped Barbee. "April!"

But she didn't move.

The thing in the box had knocked her down. It was a secret, long-buried thing, older than remembered history. Its very odor, or its emanated force, would soon be fatal. He must get April away while she was still alive.

Anxiously he looked back at the strange opening in the door. It looked smaller. The mist was thickening about it edges Still he was weak and cold and ill from that icy shock. But there was no time to waste.

He seized the loose fur at the back of her neck and dragged her limp form to the door. But the misty opening was swiftly closing and already too small to let them through. That deadly reek filled his lungs. His tongue hung out, and he couldn't breathe. Frantically he hurled himself at the door, and it flung him back.

Faintly the she-wolf whimpered:

"Look hard—and make it flow."

Reeling, he stared at the diminishing opening. Gropingly, he tried to imagine that the mist was dissolving again. At last, in a fumbling way, he grasped a curious feeling of extension and control. Slowly the hole grew wide again. He pushed the she-wolf through, sprang after her.

At that moment Nora Quain's voice sobbed through the house, muffled with terror and sleep:

"Sam! Sam!"

The bed creaked as he stirred uneasily. But neither waked. Barbee

lifted the she-wolf again, flung her over his back. Lurching and trembling, though she was no great burden, he pushed out through the screen.

The zodiacal light was lifting its warning pillar of pale silver in the east. On the little farms beyond the town roosters were beginning to crow. A dog was howling somewhere. The peril of dawn was near.

Barbee carried the white bitch back across the campus and through the drifting plume of odors from the mills and the chemical plant. He laid her down under a gnarled old apple tree at the corner of Troy's estate and began licking her white fur.

He didn't know what to do next. A faint glow was already submerging the eastern stars. The radiance of it was somehow painful. He knew that they couldn't endure the fiery deluge that would flood the world when the sun rose.

April would have to turn back into herself—or return to her sleeping body, if the white wolf bitch was only a half-material projection from it. (The latter seemed likely, since they were invisible to men and could pass through doors.)

He knew no way to help her further. To his immense relief, she moved and swayed weakly to her feet. She was panting, with her red tongue out, and her green eyes were fearful.

"Thanks, Will," she gasped. "So we failed." She shivered. "It was horrible. I'd have died, Will, if you hadn't brought me away. We can't endure the thing in the box." Her feral eyes narrowed. "We can never destroy it. We must strike at the ones who know, instead."

Barbee shook his pointed head.

"At my friends, you mean—Sam, Nick and Rex?"

The white, panting wolf grinned at him wickedly.

"They aren't your friends any more," she gasped, "because now you are running with me, in the Black Messiah's pack. We must destroy our enemies or perish."

Barbee lifted his ears.

"What man is the Black Messiah?"

"Or is there a Black Messiah?" Her green eyes mocked him. "For now, Will, you must be content to serve our cause with me." She shook her white coat and looked fearfully into the brightening east. "Now we must go back, Will, before the light destroys us."

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously. "Can you get back?"

"Thanks to you, Will." Her muzzle touched his in a cold, tingling kiss. "I'm still weak from the thing in the box. But I've run often before. I know the way, and it's easier to go back. Good-by, Will." She was urgent. "You have a long way to go—and the day comes sooner eastward."

She trotted away from him, and her white form seemed to dissolve. Barbee turned back toward his body in the far-off Pullman berth. Dimly he was

aware of it, lying stiff and a little chilled. He made a groping effort toward it, somehow as if he sought to awake from a dream.

That effort was feeble and uncertain as a child's first step. Somehow it was intolerably painful. The very pain spurred him. He tried again, desperately. Once again he felt that instant flux.

He was awake in his berth behind the dark curtains. His body ached with fatigue. He was numbed and tense and sweat-drenched from the horror of his dream. In an anxious haste he pushed up the blind. Under the dimming stars the dark landscape rolled by as up upon a rotating platform. Dawn silvered the east—and he shuddered again, as if it had been a torrent of molten death.

What a dream! He sat up and mopped his wet forehead on the sheet. If a rum hangover did such things, maybe he had better stick to whiskey—and maybe less of that. His hand stung. He lifted it into the light. And his breath went out in a long, ragged gasp.

A red scratch crossed the back of his hand—where the little dog's teeth had raked the gray wolf's paw in the dream. But that was insane. That wasn't possible. He turned back the covers with trembling fingers, searched desperately.

Here it was! With a sigh of relief he picked up the little silver pin. It must somehow have fallen out of his pocket as he undressed. His weight must have snapped it open. Somehow, turning in his sleep, he must have scratched his hand upon it. His sleeping brain had fashioned all that dream merely to explain the scratch.

He had read of such extraordinary and instantaneous feats of the unconscious mind. The queerness of the Mondrick tragedy and the conflict of his feelings about April Bell had supplied the materials. Anyhow, it might be a good idea not to drink so much.

V.

Barbee left the blind up so that the sun could flood the berth. It was a long time before the tense horror of his nightmare ebbed, so that he dropped back into uneasy sleep. Even after he rose he felt fatigued and troubled. He couldn't help being worried about April Bell. He knew it was irrational—but he was afraid. When he got off the train in Clarendon at two that afternoon he called the Trojan Arms.

"Miss Bell's apartment doesn't answer," the clerk told him.

Barbee asked for the manager. Publicity is important to hotels, and he was on very good terms with Gilkins. The manager listened and said:

"O. K., Will. This is just between you and me. Miss Bell has gone to a hospital. . . . I don't know how serious. She became suddenly ill about dawn this morning. . . . Sorry, Will. She asked us not to give out anything. I've already talked too much. . . . Well, if you must know, she

was taken in an ambulance to Glennhaven. . . . Sure, I'll call you when I hear anything. You won't let on I told you, Will?"

Shaken with new apprehension, Barbee called Glennhaven.

"No, Mr. Barbee," a liquid voice told him. "You must be mistaken. There's no Miss Bell among our patients."

His fear was absurd. Nobody can be injured in somebody else's dream. Trying to shrug off his apprehensions, he claimed his bag and took a taxi to the *Star* building. He paused across the street to shake hands with Ben Chittum, who had returned on an earlier train. He asked about Rex.

"They haven't got over Mondrick's death," the lean old man told him. "It must have been a blow to them. They all stay together." His cracked voice was lonely. "I don't see much of Rex. He stopped just a minute this morning."

He shrugged as if to forget some secret worry.

"What's the matter, Will?" He grinned and winked. "Meet some pretty redhead in New York? I thought you were on the Mondrick story, but all the *Star* printed is the AP bulletin."

"Eh?" muttered Barbee. "I telephoned three times."

"See for yourself."

The old man fumbled behind a magazine rack for the previous morning's *Star*. There was only the statement that Mondrick had dropped dead a few minutes after leaving the Lisbon *Clipper,* followed by his obituary from the morgue.

Puzzled, Barbee crossed the street. On his desk was a familiar blue-paper memo, requesting him to report to Preston Troy. The *Star* was not the greatest among Troy's enterprises—which included the mills and the Trojan Trust and the radio station and the baseball club. But the newspaper was his favorite child, and he handled most of his affairs from his office above the city room.

Barbee found the publisher dictating to a svelte titian-haired secretary—he was famous for the looks of his secretaries. Troy was a squat, dark man. He looked up at Barbee with shrewd brown eyes and rolled a black cigar across his wide, aggressive mouth.

"Find me the Walraven file," he told the girl. "Nice trip, Barbee?"

"Nice, thanks," Barbee said. "But I see Grady didn't run my story."

"I told him to cut it out."

"But it was good," Barbee protested. "A swell mystery angle. Mondrick died before he could finish his statement. His associates are too frightened to talk. I want to follow it up. Find what they discovered and what they're afraid of, and what they've got in that green box."

Troy's eyes were hard and blank.

"Too sensational for the *Star.*" His rasping voice was abruptly dictatorial. "Forget it, Barbee. You're going to do a series of political articles to launch Walraven for the senate."

Barbee gulped.

"I tell you, chief, I've got to find out what's in that green box. It haunts me. I dream about it."

"Then find out on your own time—and at your own risk." Troy's voice was flat and cold. "And not for publication." He studied Barbee with penetrating eyes and rolled the cigar back across his mouth. "Another thing, Barbee—remember that even you reporters aren't fish. Better slow up on the booze." He opened the desk humidor. "Have a cigar. Here's the Walraven file."

"Yes, chief," said Barbee.

He went back down to his desk in the noisy city room and began to finger through the pile of clippings. But it was hard to keep his mind on the problem of whitewashing Walraven's somewhat shady past. The task became unsavory. Wistfully he remembered the splendid freedom and power he had enjoyed in the dream.

To hell with Walraven!

Barbee knew that he had to get to the bottom of this mystery. If he were building haunted castles out of whiskey and coincidence, he wanted to know it. If he were not—well, insanity might be exciting, after all.

He stuffed the Walraven papers into his desk and got his four-year-old coupé out of the garage around the corner and drove out Center Street toward the university. In spite of Troy, he had to know what was in the green box. He supposed that Sam, Nick and Rex had taken it to the new lab—and realized that once more he was accepting his dream as fact.

He parked in front of Sam Quain's little white bungalow on College Street. It looked exactly as it had in the nightmare—even to the same rusted tin bucket and spade in Pat's sand pile. He knocked, and Nora opened the door.

"Why, Will—come in."

He thought she looked pale and heavy-eyed, as if she hadn't slept well.

"I just came by to find where Sam is," he told her. "I wanted to get another interview on Mondrick's Asian discoveries, and what they brought back in that mysterious box."

She shook her blond head wearily.

"Better forget it, Will. Sam won't tell me, even. And they guard that box as if it were worth millions. Sam had it here last night—and woke up with a nightmare about it. He thought somebody was trying to take it."

"Where is it now?"

"This morning they carried it down to the new anthropology lab. Sam has locked himself up there, with Nick and Rex and a few students they trust. I guess they're working on something important—but it worries me. Sam just phoned that he won't be home tonight." She sighed. "I hope Rex tells—"

She caught herself.

"Tells what?" Barbee demanded.

She twisted uncertainly at the corner of her apron.

"Sam didn't want me to say anything—" The freckles stood out from the paleness of her round, worried face. "But I can trust you, Will." Her blue eyes seemed to plead. "Oh, I'm so upset I don't know what to do."

Barbee patted her shoulder.

"Don't tell me unless you wish."

"It's nothing much." Her tired voice was grateful. "Just that Sam took our car this morning. He's lending it to Rex to drive to State College tonight. He's going to make a surprise broadcast tomorrow on their radio. You won't say anything, Will?"

"Of course not," he promised. "Well, Pat—how are you?"

Little Patricia came slowly out of the nursery. Her eyes were red and ringed with grime, and her pink, square-jawed face seemed stubbornly set against further tears.

"I'm all right, thank you, Mr. Will," she said in a voice that struggled not to break. "But poor Jiminy Cricket . . . he's all dead."

Barbee felt a frigid breath upon his spine. In an effort to cover his terrified start, he turned and coughed.

In a husky, shaken voice, he said: "That's mighty bad. What happened?"

Pat's wet blue eyes were solemn.

"Two big dogs came in the night," she said soberly. "One was white and one was gray. They wanted to take daddy's green box. They were great big dogs, but Jiminy wasn't afraid. Jiminy ran out to stop them. The big gray dog killed him."

Barbee looked uneasily at Nora.

"The little dog was lying on the sand pile this morning," she said. "I think a car struck him—some of the college boys are so reckless at night. He must have crawled back into the yard before he died."

Pat's grimy, pink jaw was stubborn.

"No, mother . . . no," she protested. "The big dogs did it. I saw them, like in a dream. Jiminy didn't want the bad dogs to get us. Didn't daddy believe me?"

"Maybe he did," Nora said uneasily. She turned a troubled face to Barbee. "Sam turned white as a sheet when Pat told about her dream—and you look pale and nervous yourself, Will."

"I haven't been getting much sleep," Barbee said. "Now I'm going to look for Sam." He put his hand against Pat's small back. "Too bad about Jiminy."

He thought she started slightly from his touch.

"I don't think Sam will tell you anything," Nora said. "If he does, Will, won't you let me know?" She went with him to the door, dropped her voice out of Pat's earshot. "Please, Will—I'm frightened!"

THE CAMPUS was gay with autumn, and leaves were falling. Barbee remembered the scents that had been so vivid in his dream. He sniffed the cool air, but his dull nostrils caught no more than a faint, familiar acrid whiff from the chemistry lab.

On the drive he met six freshmen, guarded by an equal number of sophomores, marching toward the stadium with the cage that held the Clarendon tiger. This mascot was the tawny, life-size model of a snarling saber-tooth that had been an exhibit in the university museum until it was first abducted by State College raiders.

The sight brought wistful memories to Barbee. For the Muleteers had been the four heroes who crossed the mountains in Rex's antique, stripped-down Cadillac on the eve of a homecoming game and snatched the tiger out of the very midst of a State College rally. But that was many years ago.

He parked in front of Anthropology Hall. There were classrooms in the ground-floor wings. The white, ten-story concrete tower housed the museum, the Mondrick Library of Science, the departmental offices, and offices and laboratory of the Clarendon Foundation.

Three husky pipe-smoking sophomores were idling in the hall. It seemed to Barbee that they eyed him rather sharply. The elevator was manned by a vigorous senior in a football sweater. He stopped Barbee.

"Sorry, library and museum not open today."

"But I want to see Mr. Quain."

The youth seemed to brace himself, as if to hold that line.

"Mr. Quain is busy."

"Then let me see Mr. Spivak or Mr. Chittum."

"Sorry—no visitors allowed."

"Then take up a note," Barbee said. He scrawled on a card:

SAM: It will save us both trouble if you will talk to me now.

The quarterback took up the note and returned after ten minutes with Sam Quain. Barbee was appalled by Sam's appearance. No wonder Nora was worried. His face was haggard and unshaven, and his red, hollow eyes looked desperate.

"Come with me, Will." Barbee followed him across the hall into an empty classroom. "Listen." His voice was tired and strained. "You had better lay off," he said urgently. "For your own sake, Will!"

"There's some things I've got to know," Barbee protested. "What was Mondrick trying to say when he died? What have you got in that green box?" His voice quivered. "And who is the Black Messiah?"

Flatly, Sam Quain said: "You've asked me that before."

"I still want to know," Barbee said. "You're afraid of something, Sam. Why else have you turned this building into a fortress? What is it? Sam, this thing's driving me crazy!"

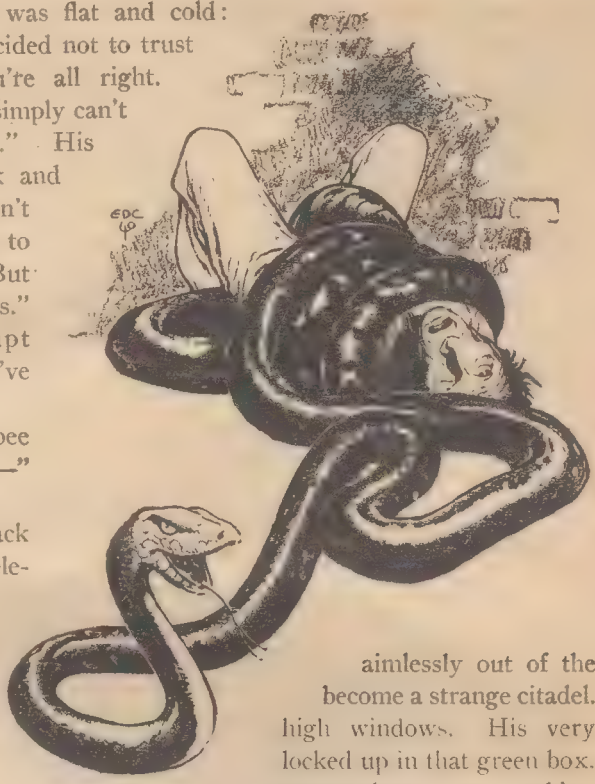
Quain's blue eyes narrowed and his Adam's apple jerked to an uneasy gulp.

"We're old friends, Will," he said at last. "Won't you leave us alone with this—while we're still friends? Can't you forget that you're a prying newshawk?"

"But you don't understand," Barbee protested. "I do know a little. I can feel that you're putting up a terrific fight against—something! I want to get in it on your side."

Sam Quain's voice was flat and cold: "Long ago Mondrick decided not to trust you, Will. Maybe you're all right. Maybe you aren't. We simply can't afford to take chances." His stubborn face was bleak and dangerous. "If you don't stop, Will—we'll have to stop you. I'm sorry. But that's just the way it is." He shook his unkempt bronze head. "Now I've got to go."

"Wait, Sam," Barbee began. "Think of Nora—"



But Quain strode back across the hall and the elevator doors shut in Barbee's face. Baffled, Barbee wandered aimlessly out of the gray tower that had become a strange citadel. He looked up at the high windows. His very sanity, he felt, was locked up in that green box. He drove back to town—there was nothing else to do. He called at Walraven's law office. Walraven gave him a drink and spent an hour explaining that his connection with the highway-department scandal was entirely innocent.

Barbee went back to his desk. But he couldn't put the green box out of his mind. Or Sam Quain's threat. Or the fact that Jiminy Cricket was dead—for the repetition of coincidence began to hint of something else.

His telephone rang.

"Barbee? . . . Hello, Will. This is Gilkins, at the Trojan Arms. . . . Yes, Miss Bell has just come in. She looked a little pale, but she said she's all right. . . . No, she left word that she's out if anyone calls. . . . Don't let on about the tip."

Barbee hung up and tried to get back to the article. But his notes on

Walraven's thrift and honor and philanthropy became a meaningless jumble, and a green-eyed wolf bitch grinned at him from the blank sheet in the machine. After an hour he decided that he had to see April Bell.

He was going to return the silver pin.

It didn't surprise him to see Preston Troy's big blue sedan on the parking lot behind the Trojan Arms. He knew that one of Troy's more gorgeous ex-secretaries had an apartment on the top floor.

April had told him the number of her second-floor apartment. He walked past the closed elevator doors and up the stairs. On the second floor he saw Troy in the hall ahead of him. The short man opened April Bell's door with his own key. Barbee caught the haunting ring of her welcoming voice, and the door closed again.

He stumbled slowly back down the stairs. He felt sick, as if from a blow in the stomach. It was true that he had no claim upon April Bell. She had mentioned a friend, and he had known that she couldn't live here on her newspaper earnings.

But still he felt sick.

VI.

BARBEE WENT BACK to his desk. He didn't want to think about April Bell, or the green box, or his werewolf dream. He sought escape in his old anodynes: work and alcohol.

He finished the Walraven article mechanically. He made his routine calls at police headquarters and Sheriff Parker's office. He covered a lecture on the Pan-American economic front and a stop-Walraven meeting of the taxpayers' association. At last, when the paper was put to bed, he stopped at the Elite Bar with some of the boys for a few more drinks.

He was afraid to go home.

It was three, and he was reeling with whiskey and fatigue, when he climbed the creaking front steps to the old house on Broad Street. Suddenly he hated it, with its musty smells and faded paper and outmoded furniture. He hated himself. He was tired and lonely and bitter, and he could see no better future.

He was afraid to go to sleep. He dawdled in the bathroom and tried to look at a book in the library. But cold and fatigue drove him to bed. Drowsiness crept upon him. And suddenly all his dread was turned to eagerness.

The Clarendon tiger flashed into his mind. He dwelt upon the sleek, tawny power of the huge saber-tooth, upon its ferocious claws and the terrible, cruel white curves of its fangs. Eagerly he shrugged off all his worries and frustrations. He made the remembered effort—this time it was easier.

His body flowed, but not to wolf form this time. He was a twelve-foot saber-toothed tiger. He sprang to the floor, landing with a catlike ease. Curiously he looked back at the bed. His body lay there, pale, drawn, scarcely

breathing. It was queer that such an ungainly husk should be a dwelling for the magnificent power that he felt.

The air of the house was choking with smells of moldering books and neglected laundry and stale tobacco and spilled whiskey. He padded swiftly to the back door—the great beast's eyes could see clearly, even by the faint rays that came through the windows from the street light on the corner.

He fumbled with his paw for the key in the lock—and then remembered the art he had learned. A circle of the door grew misty and vanished. He walked through it and out into the foul odors of burned rubber and oil upon the street. He trotted toward the Trojan Arms.

April Bell came down to meet him on the parking lot behind the building. This time she was not wolf, but woman. But he knew, when she came through the locked door, that her body, like his own, was left behind. She was nude, and her hair fell in loose red waves to her white breasts.

"You are very strong, Will, to take a tiger's form."

Admiration was warm in her velvet voice, dancing in her limpid green eyes. She came to him, and the cool, smooth pillar of her body was electric against his fur. She scratched playfully behind his ears, and he made a deep, pleased pur.

"I'm still weak," she told him. "The thing in Quain's green box almost killed me. I'm glad you're strong, Will. Because we have a job to do tonight."

He lashed his tail in dim alarm.

"What job?"

"Rex Chittum drove out of town an hour ago in Sam Quain's roadster," she told him. "He's planning to make a surprise broadcast on the State College radio about the Black Messiah. We're going to stop him."

"No," protested Barbee. "Rex is my friend—"

His scalp tingled to her caressing fingers.

"They are the enemies of the Black Messiah," she said. "We must fight them to save our own lives."

He yielded to that inexorable logic. For this was life. The world in which Rex Chittum had been his friend was no more than a vague nightmare of bitterness and despair and endless frustration.

He let the tall girl leap astride of him. She was no burden to his new and boundless strength. He carried her back past the orange-flashing blinker at Center and Main, and west past the campus toward the mountain road.

They passed dark houses. Once a frightened dog began to howl impotently behind them. The moon had set, and the black sky was frosty with the autumn constellations. Even in the colorless light of the stars, however, Barbee could see distinctly.

"Hurry!" April's smooth, tapering legs clung to his powerful body. She bent forward eagerly, her loose red hair flying in the wind. "We must catch him on Sardis Hill."

Running, Barbee rejoiced in his ruthless strength. He exulted in the

chill of the air, and the odors that passed his nostrils, and the warm pressure of the girl upon him. This was life. She had awakened him out of a walking death..

"Faster!" she urged.

The dark plain flowed back like a drifting cloud. But there were limits even to the saber-tooth's strength. As the road wound up into the dark flanks of the foothills, his pounding heart began to ache.

Barbee knew this country. Sam's father had owned a ranch in these same hills. He had ridden over it with Sam on vacations. It was over this same road that the four Muleteers, sophomores, had fled with the rescued Clarendon tiger. They had rolled boulders into the road to stop the pursuit while they changed a tire on Sardis Hill.

"There!" cried April. "Can you overtake him, Will?"

FAR AHEAD, a car was grinding up Sardis Hill. Its gears snarled in the darkness. Its tail lamps were two glaring red eyes. Barbee spurred himself to a new and desperate effort. The dark hills flowed again, and he came up behind the car.

It was the little tan roadster that Nora had bought while Sam was gone. Rex Chittum turned to look back down the road, as if apprehensive of pursuit. His dark, curly head was bare. For all his strain and fatigue, and the black stubble on his chin, he still looked handsome as a picture star.

"I can't hurt him," Barbee growled. "We were in school together. I used to lend him money when he couldn't pay for books he had bought. Think of old Ben at the newsstand. It would break his heart."

Clear and sweet and pitiless, her limpid voice said:

"Run, Will. We do what we must because we are what we are." Her electric fingers caressed his heaving flank. "To save our own lives and defend the Black Messiah! Wait, now—just behind. Wait till he's on the hairpin. Now!"

She crouched forward on him. Her fingers clutched his fur. Her bare heels dug into his flanks, and their pressure was sweet. The logic of bounding life conquered the dreary convention of death.

"Spring!"

Barbee cast off his weakness. He called up a desperate strength and leaped. His claws scratched paint, cut the fabric of the lowered top. He slipped, caught himself on the spare tire, swayed forward again.

Rex looked back. His drawn, haggard face slowly twisted and congealed into a stiff mask of fear, as if he had been made up for a role in a drama of horror.

"Now!" screamed April Bell. "His throat!"

Swiftly, mercifully, the white sabers flashed. Perhaps that was needless. Perhaps shock itself would have been enough. Dead hands let go the wheel. The roadster straightened, went off the sharp curve at the hairpin's end.

Barbee leaped again. He twisted in the air, landed with catlike skill on the slope below the curve. But April lost her balance and came down clinging to him with both hands. She made a sob of pain and grasped at her ankle, and then whispered: "Watch!"

The hurtling roadster struck sixty feet below them, upside down. It bounced, rolled, broke a sapling, stopped at last against a boulder. It was a mass of twisted metal, and the bloody thing half under it lay still.

"No," murmured April Bell. "I think they won't notice the slashes." She looked toward the misty cone of the zodiacal light, already high in the east, and clutched again at her ankle. Her voice was faintly alarmed. "Darling, I'm hurt—and the night is nearly gone. Take me home."

Weary and a little sick, Barbee carried her back down Sardis Hill. She was heavy as a leaden statue. He lurched and swayed, shivering to a strange chill. All his mad elation was gone. He couldn't forget the horror on Rex's face, or the grief that old Ben would feel.

VII.

Barbee woke late. He felt groggy and ill, and the dream haunted him with a painful vividness. The stricken, waxen mask of Rex's face stared down from the ceiling. He sat up abruptly. A clangor of agony started in his head, and a dull, leaden weariness ached in his body.

He tottered into the bathroom, holding his head. A shower, as hot and then as cold as he could stand it, washed some of the stiff pain out of him. He stirred a teaspoon of baking soda in half a glass of cold water and gulped it. If whiskey did this, he would have to cut it out.

The face in his mirror shocked him. It was bloodless and drawn, the eyes deep-sunken and red-rimmed and glittering. His pale lips twitched sardonically. This was a lunatic's face. He had started to shave the haggard visage when the phone rang.

"Will? . . . This is Nora Quain." Her voice was low and troubled. "Brace yourself, Will. Sam just called me from the lab—he stayed there all night. He called about Rex. Rex was driving to State College last night. The car turned over on Sardis Hill. Rex was killed."

The phone fell out of Barbee's trembling hands. He picked it up.

"—ghastly," Nora was saying. "His head was cut almost off. I think you had better break the news to old Ben, Will. Rex was all he had. I think you're his best friend. It's an awful thing."

"All right, Nora," he agreed shakenly. "I'll do it."

She didn't know how awful it was. Barbee wanted to scream. But he tried to shut Rex's stiff, pallid face out of his mind. He hung up the telephone and stumbled into the kitchen and took three long gulps out of a bottle of whiskey.

He dressed awkwardly and drove down to Center Street and parked in front of Ben Chittum's newsstand. The old man lived in two rooms at the

rear. He was already opening for the day, arranging magazines in racks beside the door.

"Hi, Will," his cracked voice called. "What's new?"

Barbee gulped. For the moment he was speechless.

"Busy tonight, Will?" The old man dug his pipe out of a bulging pocket. "Because I'm going to cook dinner for Rex. I haven't seen much of him since he got back. But he always liked my beef mulligan, with hot biscuits and honey, since he was a kid. I guess he'll be here. If you would want to come—"

Barbee gulped again.

"I've got some bad news for you, Ben."

The old man gasped and stared and began to tremble. The pipe dropped out of his gnarled fingers, and the stem broke on the floor.

"Rex?" he whispered.

Barbee nodded mutely.

"Bad?"

"Bad," Barbee said. "His car went off the hairpin on Sardis Hill. He was killed."

Ben Chittum stared blankly out of filling eyes.

"I've been afraid," he whispered. "Ever since they got off the *Clipper* and Mondrick died. I don't know what they've done—Rex wouldn't tell me. But they've got a curse on them, Will. Rex ain't the last that will die."

He shook his head, as if angry at his tears.

"Rex always liked my beef mulligan, Will," he said softly. "With hot biscuits and honey. Ever since he was a kid."

Wearily he locked up the newsstand. Barbee drove him to the city morgue to await the return of the ambulance. The county sheriff arrived, and Barbee gave the old man into Parker's kindly hands.

ANOTHER SLUG of whiskey failed to ease the throb in Barbee's head. He felt weak and ill. A frenetic tension of terror crept inexorably upon him. Desperately he tried to move deliberately, to pretend a calm sanity that he did not feel.

He had to see April Bell.

He drove to the lot behind the Trojan Arms and took the elevator to the second floor. Disregarding the "Don't Disturb" sign outside her door, he knocked vigorously. If the chief's still here, he thought grimly, let him crawl under the bed.

April Bell was slim and lovely in a sea-green robe, with the red hair loose about her shoulders. Her face looked pale, and she hadn't painted her lips. Her green eyes lighted as she recognized him.

"Oh, Will—come in."

Barbee came in and sat down wearily. Troy wasn't in sight, but lying on the stand beside his chair was a heavy gold cigar case that he thought he had seen before. He turned back to the girl. It was easy to remember

how she had looked in the dream with her red hair streaming on the wind. He thought uneasily that she seemed to limp a little as she came back to the davenport beyond the gas fireplace.

"How've you been, Will?" Her voice was honey and music. "I've been waiting for you to call."

Barbee caught his breath. He tried to keep his hands from trembling. He rose from the chair and walked across to the other end of the sofa. Her green eyes followed him with a faintly malicious interest.

"April," he said hoarsely, "in New York you told me you were a witch."

Her white smile mocked him.

"That's what you get for making me tight."

Barbee's tense hands clenched together.

"I had a dream last night." His voice was low and forced. "I thought I was a saber-tooth. You were—well, with me. I killed Rex Chittum on Sardis Hill. This morning Rex is really dead."

"That's too bad." But still her pale lips smiled, and her voice was sympathy—and mockery. "I dreamed of my grandfather the night he died." Her green eyes were limpidly clear as mountain lakes. "Sardis Hill is dangerous."

Barbee gulped down an uneasy breath. He wanted to sink his fingers into her white, soft shoulders and shake the evasive mockery out of her. Yet he was stiff and tense with fear of her. He shrugged and rose, as if to shake it off.

"I believe this is yours." He found the little silver pin in his pocket. It was heavy and cold. He shivered a little as he laid it on her white, extended palm. "I want to return it."

Her eyes were wide and dark, innocently wondering.

"Oh—that's the pin I lost in New York. Thank you so much. It's an heirloom. Where did you find it?"

Barbee thrust his head at her grimly.

"It was stuck in a dead kitten's heart."

Her long body shuddered in the green robe.

"How gruesome! Mr. Barbee, you're so morbid today." Her liquid eyes studied him. "You don't look well at all. I think you've been drinking too much. Don't you think that you had better see a doctor? I believe that Dr. Glenn is very successful—if you will forgive me—with dipsomania."

"Maybe—" Barbee turned uncertainly toward the door. "Maybe you're right."

"Don't go." She rose with a feral grace—but again he thought she was concealing a limp. "Just a suggestion, from a friend." He caught the faint scent of her as she brushed past him. It was sweet and clean, like mountain pines. It brought back his dreams. "You're trembling. Here, have a cigar."

As she opened the heavy gold case he contrived to read the engraved monogram. It was *PT*. And the cigars were the strong, black perfectos

that Preston Troy used. He accepted one mechanically and stumbled blindly toward the door.

"Thanks," he murmured.

She stood in the middle of the room, watching him with wide, challenging eyes. The green robe had opened a little to expose her white throat. Her beauty caught his breath. It hurt like a knife twisted in him.

He shut the door behind him and threw down the tapering cigar in the hall and ground it under his heel. He felt sick. Maybe Troy was old enough to be her father. But he was no longer a spring chicken himself; and twenty millions could easily make up for twenty years.

He walked slowly down the stairs, through a dull, gray mist of pain, and back to his parked car. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps he should go to Glenn. His tangle of horror and grief and pain and bewilderment and fatigue and wild longing and uncertainty and dread was passing the limits of mental endurance. He didn't know anything else to do.

Glennhaven, he knew, ranked among the country's best private mental hospitals. The small staff included distinguished neuropathologists and psychiatrists. Glenn's own laboratory research, with the correlation of mental and physical types and abnormalities, had been given three columns in *Time*. He was a stalwart materialist. He had been a friend of the famous Houdini, and he stilll made a sort of hobby of exposing sham mediums. He had lectured and written articles in an effort to halt the wave of popular faith in astrologers and fortunetellers and pseudo-scientific and pseudo-religious cults of all kinds. Mind, his motto ran, was strictly and entirely a function of the body.

Who could be a better ally?

BARBEE STARTED the car and drove out Center Street and north on the new river road. Glennhaven occupied a hundred acres on the hills above the river, four miles out of Clarendon. Trees bright with autumn screened the hospital buildings and the occupational therapy shops away from the highway.

Barbee parked his car on the gravel lot behind the long, expensive-looking main building. He walked in breathlessly, tense with trepidation. His old horror of mental diseases and mental institutions turned the place into a mysterious prison. With trembling, fumbling fingers he gave his card to the efficient woman at the switchboard. He gulped in vain for his voice and whispered hoarsely that he wanted to see Dr. Glenn.

"Dr. Glenn's very busy," she told him. "Would Dr. Camp do? Or Dr. Mehrens?"

Barbee swallowed again, got back his voice.

"Please let Glenn know I'm here. I'll wait until he can see me."

She talked into a telephone that smothered her voice. The doubt on her face changed to surprise.

"Dr. Glenn will see you in ten minutes," she said. "If you'll just go with Nurse Graulitz, please."

Nurse Graulitz was a muscular, horse-faced, glass-eyed blonde. She looked capable of making Joe Louis take his medicine and like it. Barbee followed her down a long, quiet corridor and into a small office. In a voice like a muffled foghorn, she asked him a series of questions, among them who was responsible for his bill and how much alcohol he drank. She wrote the answers on a cardboard blank. Just as she finished, a door opened behind her. She rose and boomed softly at Barbee:

"Dr. Glenn will see you now."

The famous psychiatrist was a tall, handsome man, with wavy black hair and sleepy, hazel eyes. He held out a tanned, well-kept hand, smiling cordially. Barbee stared, lost in a curiously strong impression that he had known Dr. Glenn long ago.

"Good morning, Mr. Barbee." His voice was deep and quiet. "Come in, please."

His office was expensively simple, airy and attractive, with few things to distract the attention. Two big leather chairs, a couch, clock and ash tray and a bowl of flowers on a little table, a bookcase filled with medical volumes and copies of the *Psychoanalytic Review*. Venetian blinds gave a view of the brilliant woods and the river.

Barbee seated himself, mute and uneasy.

Glenn dropped carelessly into the other chair and tapped a cigarette on his thumb. He looked extremely capable and unworried. It was queer, Barbee thought, that he hadn't felt that sense of recognition when he interviewed Glenn two years ago. It expanded swiftly into liking and confidence.

"Smoke," Glenn said. "Now, what seems to be the trouble?"

Barbee took courage and blurted: "Witchcraft!"

Glenn seemed neither surprised nor impressed. He merely waited.

"Either I've been bewitched, doctor," Barbee told him desperately, "or I'm losing my mind."

Glenn deliberately exhaled pale smoke.

"Suppose you just tell me about it."

"It began three days ago at the New York airport." Barbee began. "This girl came up to me while we were waiting for the *Clipper*—"

He told about Mondrick's death and the strangled kitten, and the riddle of the green box, and the rather inexplicable fear that so visibly haunted the men who had been with Mondrick, and the dreams when he had run with April Bell as a wolf and as a saber-tooth.

"And today," he finished, "Rex is dead." His hoarse voice quivered. "Tell me, doctor—do you think I murdered him last night under a witch's spell?" Desperately he searched Glenn's bland face. "Or am I insane?"

Carefully Archer Glenn set his fingertips together.

"This will take time," his calm, deep voice said slowly. "I suggest that

we arrange for you to stay at Glennhaven for a few days. That will give our staff an opportunity to help you."

Barbee rose out of his chair, tense and breathless.

"But what about it?" His voice was ragged. "Did these things happen? Or am I crazy?"

Glenn's sleepy eyes watched him until he sat down again.

"Things that happen often aren't so important as the interpretation that the mind—conscious or unconscious—places upon them." The doctor's voice sounded lazy and matter-of-fact. "You have made one point very clear. Every incident that you have mentioned, from Mondrick's asthmatic attack to Chittum's fatal accident, has a perfectly logical, natural explanation."

"That's what is driving me mad," Barbee told him. "It all might be coincidence—but *is* it?" His strained voice went higher. "How did I know of Rex Chittum's death before I was told?"

Carefully Glenn crushed out his cigarette.

"Sometimes the mind deceives us." His voice was easy, restful. "Let's take a calm view. You've been driving yourself, Mr. Barbee, and drinking a great deal. You must realize that such a life must end in collapse, of one kind or another."

Barbee sat tense.

"So you think I'm—insane?"

Glenn's brown, handsome face smiled reassuringly.

"Let's not jump to hasty conclusions," he said gravely. "But I might comment that Miss Bell evidently disturbs you—and that Freud himself describes love as normal insanity."

He placed the fingers of his two hands together again.

"In all of us, Mr. Barbee, there are hidden unconscious feelings of fear and guilt. Don't you think that it is possible—at a time when your con-

scious restraint happens to be weakened by the combination of alcohol and fatigue and emotion—that these buried ideas have begun to find expression in vivid dreams or even waking hallucinations?"

SHAKING his head, Barbee looked uneasily out at the red and yellow and lingering green of the hills. Beside the dark river lay a field of golden corn, and the silver vanes of a windmill, beyond, were flashing in the sun. He wanted to escape from this small room and Glenn's shrewd probing. Dimly he began to long for the freedom and the power of his dreams.

Glenn's calm, grave voice went on:

"You had been intensely interested in Mondrick and his work. From these friends you had absorbed a pretty wide scientific knowledge of the universal primitive beliefs in magic and witchcraft and lycanthropy. No doubt those facts have given an unusual direction to your fantasy expressions."

His sleepy hazel eyes were suddenly piercing.

"Tell me—did you ever consciously desire to kill Dr. Mondrick?"

Barbee squirmed uneasily in his chair.

"When I was in college—" He hesitated, gulped. "Mondrick excluded me from his advanced classes and admitted Sam, Nick and Rex. For a long time I was pretty bitter about it."

Glenn nodded with an expression of enlightenment.

"That explains a good deal. You wished Mondrick's death and he died. Therefore, by the simple timeless logic of the unconscious, you are guilty."

"But there's Rex," Barbee protested. "My friend."

"But also," Glenn suggested suavely, "your enemy. He, Sam and Nick were chosen, remember, when you were rejected. You must have been jealous."

Barbee caught his breath angrily.

"But not murderous!"

"Unconsciously, I mean," Glenn said smoothly. "Remember, the unconscious it utterly selfish, utterly blind. Time means nothing to it. It ignores contradictions. You wished harm to Rex. He died. Therefore you are guilty. Your weretiger dream is the natural—the inevitable—expression of that elemental unconscious guilt."

Barbee nodded reluctantly.

"Maybe." Almost savagely he added: "But Sam and Nick are still my friends. They are fighting a desperate battle. I want to help them—not to be the tool of their enemies!"

Glenn's sleepy eyes smiled.

"Your vehemence seems to prove what I have told you." He looked lazily at the clock. "If you wish to stay at Glennhaven, we can discuss your case again tomorrow."

Barbee kept his seat.

"There's one question I've got to ask," he said urgently. "April Bell

told me that she was once your patient." He searched Glenn's bland face. "Tell me, has she any . . . any supernatural powers?"

The tall psychiatrist rose gravely.

"Professional ethics forbid me to discuss a patient," he said. "But if a general answer will satisfy you, I have investigated thousands of cases of so-called psychic phenomena of all kinds—and I have yet to find the first case where the common laws of nature fail to hold."

He opened the door, but still Barbee waited.

"The most convincing material I have seen is Dr. Rhine's," he went on. "But others have failed to duplicate his results with ESP, and his laboratory methods have been gravely questioned."

He shook his head soberly.

"This universe, to me, is strictly mechanistic. Every phenomenon that takes place in it—from the birth of suns to the tendency of men to live in fear of gods and devils—was implicit in the primal super-atom from whose explosive cosmic energy it was formed. The so-called supernatural, Mr. Barbee, is pure delusion, based on misdirected emotion and inaccurate observation and illogical thinking."

His calm brown face smiled again.

"Does that make you feel better?"

"It does, doc." Barbee took his strong hand. Again he was aware of a flood of instinctive liking, almost of kinship. "And thanks. That's what I wanted to hear."

Nurse Graulitz was waiting for him in the outer office. Putty in her capable hands, Barbee telephoned Troy that he wanted to spend a few days at Glennhaven for his nerves.

"Sure, Will." The publisher's rasping voice was sympathetic. "You've been killing yourself—and I know Chittum was your friend. Glenn's just the man to fix you up. We'll get the *Star* out. And don't worry about your job."

Yielding again to Miss Graulitz, Barbee decided that he didn't need to drive back to Clarendon for his toothbrush and pajamas, or even to attend Rex Chittum's funeral. Obediently he followed her to the big red-tiled dormitory.

She showed him the library, the music room, the games room, the dining room. She introduced him to several persons—leaving him a little confused as to which were patients and which staff members.

She left him at last, at his own room on the second floor, with the injunction to ring for Nurse Etting if he wanted anything. He sat down wearily on the side of the bed. The room was small but comfortable, with bath adjoining. He had been given no key for the door. He noticed that the windows were of reinforced glass, steel-framed, adjusted so that nothing much larger than a snake could escape through them.

So this was madness!

He sighed and wearily mopped his sticky palms and his forehead. He didn't feel insane—but, then, did any lunatic ever? He was merely confused and exhausted from a struggle with problems that were too much for him. It was good to rest for a while.

Sometimes he had wondered about insanity. He had supposed that it must be strange and thrilling, with a conflict of horrible depression and wild elation. But perhaps it was more often like this, just a baffled apathetic retreat.

He began to want a drink. Perhaps he could have smuggled in a bottle. At last he decided to put Nurse Etting to the test. He pushed the button that hung on a cord at the head of his bed.

Nurse Etting was rangy and tanned. She had a comic-strip buck-toothed face. Her rolling walk suggested that her legs were bowed. She reminded him of a rodeo queen he had once interviewed.

Yes, she told him in a flat, nasal voice, he could have one drink before dinner and not more than two afterward. She brought him a generous jigger of very good Bourbon and a glass of soda.

"Thanks," Barbee said defiantly. "Here's to the snakes!"

He tossed off the whiskey. Unimpressed, Nurse Etting rolled out with the empty glass. Barbee lay on the bed for a while, thinking about what Glenn had told him. Maybe it was all hallucination—

But he couldn't forget the peculiar vividness of his sensations as he padded through the chill, fragrant damp of the night in the saber-tooth's mighty guise. He couldn't forget the strong, warm feel of the girl clinging to his back, and the deadly power of his leap, and the hot, sweet-smelling spurt of Rex Chittum's blood. Nothing quite so real had ever happened to him awake.

The drink had relaxed him, and he began to feel a little drowsy. He began to think that it would be very easy for a snake to slide out under the steel-framed window. If he went to sleep, he could easily change into a snake and go back to April. If he found Preston Troy in her room—well, a thirty-foot constrictor could take care of Troy.

The radiator snapped, and he flung himself off the bed with a muttered curse. This wouldn't do at all. He was dull and heavy with fatigue, and the sudden movement made him giddy. But he decided to go downstairs.

He had always wondered about asylums. He thought of taking notes for a feature story on this adventure. That long afternoon, however, Glennhaven began to seem remarkable for the lack of noteworthy incident. It began to appear as a sort of fragile never-never land, populated with timid souls in continual retreat from the real world outside and one another within.

In the music room, when Barbee got a war bulletin on the radio, a thin, pretty girl dropped a tiny sock she had been knitting and hurried out, sobbing. He played checkers with a pink-faced, white-bearded Major French, who managed to upset the board every time Barbee crowned a king and then apologized profusely. At dinner, Dr. Camp and Dr. Mehrens made a pain-

ful and not very successful effort to keep a light conversation going. Barbee went back to his room, rang for Nurse Etting, and ordered his two permissible drinks at once.

Suddenly he was very sleepy.

He heard a thin eldritch howl that sent an eerie little chill along his spine. Dogs on the farms above Glennhaven began barking savagely. But he knew that it wasn't a dog that had howled. It was the white wolf bitch. She was waiting for him down by the river.

Barbee looked again at the narrow slit under the window. It would be so easy to change into a snake and crawl out through it. The wolf's howl quavered again, and he went breathless with a tingling eagerness.

But he was afraid—

By the rational scientific logic of Dr. Glenn, he cherished an unconscious jealous hatred of Sam and Nick. In the mad logic of his dreams, April Bell was still resolved that they must be destroyed because of the deadly secret in the green box.

He felt sick with a shuddering fear of what the snake might do.

He delayed going to bed. He scrubbed his teeth with a new brush until his gums bled. He took a deliberate bath and carefully trimmed his toenails and put on white, too-large pajamas. He sat up in bed, trying to read a novel that Nurse Etting had brought from the library. But he couldn't keep his mind on the intricate story of spies against the Nazis—he couldn't help wondering if Hitler were the Black Messiah.

The she-wolf howled again.

She was calling to him. He closed the book, shuddering with a horror of that bestial change. Then his horror merged into the gray frustration of the world. He thrust it back behind him and let himself go with the flood of desire. He woke in the real world of his dreams.

The book fell out of his hands—

Only he didn't have hands. He glided across the rug and thrust his flat head under the window and let his long body flow silently over the sill. He dropped, in a mound of powerful coils, and straightened himself and went twisting down toward the river.

The white bitch came trotting to meet him out of a clump of willows with her green eyes shining eagerly. He flicked out his long black tongue to touch her cold muzzle, and his thick, scaled body rippled to the ecstasy of that strange kiss.

"So you were tight," he jibed, "when you said you were a witch?"

She laughed at him silently, with her red tongue hanging.

"Please, April," he protested. "You're driving me insane!"

Her dancing green eyes turned sober.

"It's always painful and bewildering at first." Her warm tongue licked his flat snout affectionately. "We'll have fun, Will," she promised. "But we still have work to do. Two of our enemies live. They are learning. They

have a weapon in that wooden box. We must destroy them before they master it."

In her eyes blazed a sudden feral fury.

"We must finish them tonight—for the Black Messiah!"

Barbee shook his broad black head.

"Sam?" he whispered faintly. "And Nick? Think of Pat and Nora—"

"So it's Nora again?" The wolf's eyes sparkled maliciously. Her white fangs nipped his neck half playfully and yet with a savage force. "It is their lives," she said, "or ours."

Barbee objected no farther. In this glorious awakening from the nightmare of life, all values were changed. He whipped two turns of his tail about the white wolf's body, squeezed until she gasped.

"It's all right about Nora," he told her. "But if a dinosaur happened to catch Preston Troy in bed with you, it might be—too bad."

He released her and she shook her white fur angrily.

"Don't you touch me, snake in the grass!" Her voice was honey and vitriol.

"Who's Preston Troy?"

Her white fangs grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know?" She sprang away from him. "But now we've got a job to do."

THE UNDULATIONS of Barbee's long, powerful body thrust him forward in flowing waves of motion. The friction of his scales made a soft burring sound on the fallen leaves. He kept pace with the running wolf, his lifted head level with her own.

The night world was oddly different to him now. His scent was not so keen as the wolf's had been, nor his vision so sharp as the saber-tooth's. But he could hear the gentle sigh of the river, and the rustle of mice in the fields, and all the tiny sounds of sleeping animals and people in the dark farm buildings they passed. Clarendon, as they approached it, became a terrific din of drumming motors and screaming tires and raucous horns and jangling telephones and howling radios and barking dogs and droning, wailing, bellowing human voices.

Once more they crossed the dark campus.

Even the gray tower of Anthropology Hall was dark, except for lights in the top-floor windows, where Sam and Nick defied the Black Messiah. Two husky lettermen were on guard at the entrance, with revolvers and special police badges. As the wolf and the great snake approached, one of them started uneasily.

"Listen, Jug!" His voice was hoarse and anxious. "Every dog in town has gone to howling. I tell you, this job's got me nuts. You can see that Quain and Spivak know they're next on the list. Whatever they've got in that box from Asia—I wouldn't look at it for forty million smackers!"

Jug peered into the shadows and loosened his gun.

"Hell, Charlie—don't let it get you down." He shrugged. "We're here

to earn ten bucks a night. Me, I don't take stock in this curse stuff. Mondrick and the rest of them just stayed off in those deserts too long. They're crazy—the whole damned gang. Me, I'd like to know what they've got in the box. Maybe it's worth forty millions!" His voice dropped. "Maybe it was worth a couple of murders, to Spivak and Quain!"

Jug didn't see the sleek white wolf that trotted across the walk in front of him, or the huge gray-and-black-patterned snake that writhed after her. She made an opening in the locked door in the way she knew. The snake followed her across the dark hall, and through another door, and up ten flights of stairs.

Two more athletes with guns and badges were playing penny ante at a desk in the top-floor hall. They also were blind to the passing of the wolf and the snake, and one more door dissolved before the green eyes of April Bell.

Sam Quain and Nick Spivak had locked themselves into a small corner room. Nick was wearily propped at a desk, writing. His stooped, flat-chested body looked emaciated. He started nervously as the wolf and the snake came in and peered around the room. Behind his thick-lensed glasses, his eyes were bloodshot and haggard and feverish. Black with a stubble of beard, his thin face was gray and tense with a haunting fear.

Sam lay sleeping on a cot in the corner. Hollowed and drawn with an utter exhaustion, his tanned, red-stubbled face was grimly stubborn even in sleep. One tense hand reached out from under the blanket to clutch a leather handle of the iron-bound box.

Nick's terrible red eyes looked straight at Barbee. But he didn't see the snake or the wolf. Shuddering, his thin shoulders hunched as if from cold, he turned back to the desk. His trembling fingers turned a fragment of age-yellowed bone. He picked up something that looked like an old paper weight, and Barbee glided silently near to see it.

It was white plaster. It looked like the cast of a dirk-shaped, deep-graven stone. A part of the rim was worn smooth. It was cracked, and a little segment was broken out and gone. He saw that Nick had been copying the strange inscriptions. Trying to decipher them, probably, for the queer characters spilled across his yellow pages in rows and columns, mingled with numbers and English script.

Something drove Barbee back from the thing. It was the same numbing, deadly chill that he had felt the night he touched the green box in Sam Quain's study. He recoiled into a compact heap of defiance.

His flat eyes peered at Sam again. He could sense the terror and the desperate purpose that commanded this strange citadel, where two weary men battled the unknown menace of the Black Messiah. A faint sympathy stirred in his cold body, and pity for Nora and Pat.

"I won't do it," he whispered. "I won't hurt Sam."

"Nora'll be grateful." The wolf's red mouth grinned. "We can't touch him—the weapon in the box protects him. But that isn't necessary. Spivak

is the one. He'd studying the weapon. But I don't think he can use it—yet. Just take care of him."

BARBEE THRUST himself back into the cold, paralyzing aura that surrounded the plaster disk. He pressed his stiff coils toward the small, tired man writing. For the man was an enemy. Things were different now. Papa and Mama Spivak, in the little tailor shop on Flatbush Avenue, were creatures of a remote dead dream. The real things, the things that mattered, were his own savage strength, and the will of the Black Messiah, and the love of the green-eyed wolf.

Nervously, Nick studied the plaster disk again. He lighted a cigarette and crushed it out, and looked apprehensively again toward where Sam slept.

"God," he muttered, "I'm jittery tonight!" He pushed the cast away from him and hunched grimly over his papers again. "If I could read that one damn character." He chewed his pencil, and his pale forehead wrinkled. "That might do it—the Stone licked them once, and it can again!" He gulped a long, determined breath. "Let's see again—if the alpha sign really stands for unity—"

But Barbee had thrust himself between the man and the curious disk. Three times his thick body whipped around. Then, constricting, he made himself manifest.

Nick's pale face stiffened with horror. Behind the glasses, his red eyes popped. He opened his mouth to scream, but a heavy blow from the side of Barbee's flat head paralyzed his throat. The breath hissed out of his collapsing chest. With a spasmodic effort he tried to rise. The coils drew tighter and his chest caved in. In a last flailing effort, his hand touched the disk. Barbee shuddered to the numbing shock of it. Desperately he constricted again. Bones snapped. Blood spurted across the papers on the desk.

"Quick!" urged the wolf. "The other one's waking up."

She ran to a window, unlocked it with her deft paws, thrust it open.

Barbee began to roll awkwardly to it, with his crushed but still pulsating burden. He heard Sam stir heavily on the cot, heard a sleep-drugged, apprehensive cry: "Nick—what the devil!"

It wasn't easy to move even so slight a form as Nick's when you were coiled around and around it. But Barbee hooked his flat head outside the window, and the bleeding body dragged slowly across the floor.

April ran back to the desk and snatched up Nick's pencil in her supple paw.

"I don't think he'll wake," she cried softly. "Not for a while. And I've some writing to do."

Awkwardly, Barbee toppled the crushed body over the sill. His coils slipped on a smear of blood and he fell with it.

He must have cried out in apprehension, for April's anxious voice rang after him: "Back, Will—you can go back!"

Hurtling downward through those ten stories of darkness, he uncoiled

from the mass of dripping pulp that had been Nick Spivak. He flung it beneath him. Desperately, he made the effort to return to his own body in the room at Glennhaven. Slowly the flowing change began.

Beneath, the body crunched and flattened with a dull, heavy sound upon the pavement. He had time to see that the guards were gone. His sensitive ears caught Jug's protesting voice from College Street.

"What the hell, Charlie! Nothing's gonna happen while we drink a malt."

Then Barbee came crashing down—

But not upon the concrete walk in front of Anthropology Hall. He struck the floor beside his bed in the room at Glennhaven. Dr. Glenn, no doubt, would tell him that he had merely rolled off the pillows on which he had propped himself to read. That all his dream had come merely from the unconscious effort to explain his fall.

VIII.

THE RUTHLESS elation of the dream ebbed swiftly, and a dull sickness of horror flooded Barbee in its stead. He knew, with a stunning and terrible certainty, that Nick Spivak was now lying dead and broken on the walk in front of Anthropology Hall.

He stood up, swaying and weak and ill, rubbing at his stiff, bruised back. His neck smarted where the she-wolf's fangs had nipped him. He looked at his watch. It was one fifteen. Trembling, clammy with sweat, he pulled on shirt and trousers. Impatiently he pressed the call button. He had his shoes on by the time the night nurse appeared—Miss Hellar had gorgeous, fluffy, platinum hair, and the physique of a lady wrestler.

"I've got to see Glenn," he said. "Right now."

Her broad, alarming face broke into a gentle smile.

"Of course, Mr. Barbee," she said soothingly. "Just wait and we'll see—"

"Lady," Barbee interrupted grimly, "this is no time to show off your maniac-buttering technique. I may be crazy and I may not be—I hope I am. Crazy or not, I'm going to talk to Glenn. Where does he sleep?"

Nurse Hellar stepped warily back and crouched a little.

"Don't get fresh," Barbee advised her grimly. "Maybe you can handle common lunatics. But you'll run if I turn into a big black rat."

She retreated farther and turned a little pale.

"All I want is to talk to Glenn for five minutes," Barbee said. "If he doesn't like it, let him put it on my bill."

"It might come pretty high," warned Nurse Hellar. Grinning, Barbee dropped to all fours. "But you win," she said shakily. "I'll show you his house."

"Smart girl!"

He stood up again. Nurse Hellar waited for him to walk ahead of

her down the stairs—he couldn't put aside an uneasy idea that she thought he really could turn into a rat. From the door she pointed out Glenn's dark mansion, and she seemed relieved when he left her.

Lights sprang on in the upper windows before Barbee reached the house, and he knew that the nurse had telephoned. The tall, suave psychiatrist himself, in a rather barbaric dressing gown, opened the door. He looked sleepier than ever.

"Well, Mr. Barbee?"

"It's happened again," Barbee blurted. "This time it was a snake. I killed Nick Spivak. I want you to call the police. They'll find him lying dead under the windows of Anthropology Hall—and I'm his murderer!"

He mopped his wet forehead.

Glenn's hazel eyes blinked heavily. He shook his tousled, curly dark head. Once more Barbee felt that warm, inexplicable flood of confidence and kinship.

Glenn shrugged in the splendid robe. His calm, deep voice said: "No, we can't do that?"

"But he's dead!" Barbee shuddered. "My friend—"

"If there is no corpse," Glenn said, "the police would be troubled for nothing. If there is one, they would wonder how you knew about it. I am a strict materialist—but the police are brutal materialists."

Barbee's teeth chattered. "Do you think—I really killed him?"

"By no means," Glenn said smoothly. "But I see an interesting alternative possibility." His sleepy eyes blinked. "You have been trying to solve the mystery surrounding Mondrick and his associates. Consciously you have failed. But the unconscious, remember, is keener than we often give it credit for being."

Deliberately, he placed his long brown fingers together.

"Unconsciously, Barbee," he said gravely, "you may have suspected that Nick Spivak would be thrown out of a window tonight."

"Nonsense!" Barbee stiffened angrily. "Only Sam was there—"

"Exactly." Glenn's dark, curly head made a slight I-told-you-so nod. "Your conscious mind rejects the possibility that Sam Quain is a murderer—it may be because unconsciously you want him to die for murder."

Barbee clenched a trembling fist.

"By Heaven," he choked hoarsely, "I won't have it!" He thrust himself forward and gulped for his voice. "That . . . that's diabolical. It's insane. I tell you, man, Sam and Nora are my best friends!"

Softly Glenn asked: "Both of them?"

Barbee opened his sweaty fist, clenched it.

"Shut up!" he gasped. "By Heaven, you can't say that to me!"

Glenn retreated hastily with a disarming smile.

"Just a suggestion," he said. "Your violent reaction indicates that it reaches a pretty tender spot. But suppose we forget it for tonight and go back to bed?"

Barbee caught an uneasy breath and thrust his hands in his pockets.

"All right, doc." His voice was shaken. "I'm sorry." In a low, savage voice he added: "But you're dead wrong. The woman I love is April Bell."

With a faint sardonic smile, Glenn closed the door.

Barbee walked slowly back through the night to the dormitory. It was somehow strange to be moving on two awkward legs, seeing only formless shapes with a man's dull eyes, unaware of all the sounds and odors of his dreams.

Glenn was a fool. It was true that he once had loved Nora. Perhaps he had seen a good deal of her in the years of Sam's absence. But Glenn's revolting conclusion was absurd. Sam was as dear to him as Nora.

About calling the police, though, Glenn was right. Any call would prove him either a lunatic or a murderer. He clenched his clammy fists again and gulped a great breath of the chill night air. If Nick were really lying dead on the walk, and Sam likely to be suspected of murder, he had to do something. And there was one thing he could do.

He hurried back into the dormitory. Nurse Hellar rather fearfully let him use the office telephone, and he called Nora Quain. She answered quickly, as if she had been awake, and her voice was sharp with apprehension.

"What is it, Will?"

"Sam has a phone in the lab?" he said. "Please call him right away. Wake him up. I believe that something has happened to Nick. Sam's in danger because of it."

With a choked, frightened cry, Nora hung up.

Barbee went wearily back to his room. This was surely enough for one night. Perhaps the white wolf would let him sleep.

THE SUN was shining when he woke again, but the building was still silent. Nurse Hellar, of the glorious hair and super-dynamic physique, was sitting at her desk downstairs. She hastily attempted to conceal an actual-confessions magazine and told him that breakfast would be served in two hours. Her manner was cautiously watchful, and Barbee was amused to notice a large rat trap set beside her desk. She didn't know if the morning paper had come, but he could look.

Barbee found a damp copy of the *Star* on the lawn. Anxiously he scanned the box of bold-face stop-press bulletins. The paper began to shake in his hands as he read:

"CURSE" TAKES THIRD

Nicolas Chittum, twenty-eight, fellow of Clarendon University, was found dead early this morning, by special campus watchmen, beneath an open tenth-floor window in Anthropology Hall. In connection with the death, police are seeking Samuel Quain, now sole survivor of the famous "cursed" expedition headed by Dr. Paul Mondrick. Quain is missing, with the mysterious green box, which has been closely guarded since the return of the ill-fated group. Police are thought to suspect that priceless relics of a

prehistoric Asian culture, in the box, have supplied a motive for three clever "accidental" murders. For details of the man hunt now being organized by city police and the county sheriff's office, see later editions of the *Star*.

The paper dropped out of Barbee's numbed fingers. Perhaps there was a murder plot. But Sam Quain wasn't the plotter—despite Glenn's diabolical suggestion, that was unthinkable. Sam was to be the fourth victim.

In the cold, early sunlight, Barbee shuddered. Here was a brain, cold and ruthless and malignant, killing to keep its mad secret. Here was the deadly hand of the Black Messiah. And he—he reeled to the sickening certainty of it—had been a tool.

He caught his breath. Whatever he had done, under the power of this streamlined witch, there might be yet a chance to undo something. He must try, if he could, to help Sam. He called back to Nurse Hellar:

"Tell Glenn I've gone back to town."

"Really, Mr. Barbee," she began a protest, "hadn't you better talk—"

"No," said Barbee.

Somehow it pleased him to see Nurse Hellar's awe. Her large mouth opened and closed. Her broad face turned a little pale. His threat about the rat had been remarkably effective. Without another word, she let him go.

He found his car on the gravel lot where he had parked it, and drove rapidly toward the campus. A milk truck rattled across the quiet street in front of him. He passed a belated newsboy on a bicycle. The chill autumn air had a smoky crispness. It was a perfectly normal, believable world.

But Barbee was shuddering.

THE autumn-splashed, sun-flooded landscape was just a painted veil. It concealed a silent, brooding horror that was too frightful for sane minds to think of. Even the stout man in white coveralls driving the milk truck might—just might—be the Black Messiah.

A police car was patroling the campus. Barbee grinned and honked at Sergeant Ryan and Lieutenant Green. He parked in front of Sam Quain's white bungalow. Nora opened the door. Her round, freckled face was pale and tear-stained and sleepless.

"Oh, Will!" Her blue eyes lighted with tired relief. "I'm glad you came. It's been such a terrible night. The police were here for hours, grilling me about Sam. They're still watching the house. But don't worry—I didn't tell them you warned us."

Barbee followed her into the simple front room. It was cold. The shades were still drawn, the lights still burning. She was trying hard not to sob. She touched her pale, quivering lips.

"Pat's asleep."

"This is awful." Barbee put his arm around her tense, trembling body. "Where's Sam?"

"I don't know." She shook her blond, disheveled head hopelessly. "Oh,

Will—" Agony choked her. She whispered faintly: "I'm afraid I'll never see him again."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

She made a noisy gulp, and her tense shoulders jerked in angry defiance of her sobs.

"I called him right away," she said huskily. "It was a long time before he answered, and his voice was sleepy. I told him what you said. He laid down the phone. In a minute he spoke again—in a terrible, desperate, frightened voice.

"'My God, Nora!' I remember his very words. 'They've killed Nick, too. I'm next. I'm going to try to get away. If I make it, you'll hear from me—somehow. Tell Pat I love her.' Then he said good-by."

Nora wiped her red eyes.

"That's all, Will. He hung up before I could ask any questions." Her frantic fingers sank into Barbee's arm. "Who did it, Will?" she gasped desperately. "And how did you find out?"

Barbee couldn't meet her tortured eyes.

"Just a phone call," he lied lamely. "The usual anonymous tip."

She clung to him, shuddering.

"Will, this is—frightful." It was a stricken whisper. "They've found papers in Nick's handwriting. They think Sam did it all for something in that green box. They say he poisoned Mondrick. And tinkered with the steering gear of the car—it was our car, you know—so that it failed and killed Rex. And murdered Nick, and threw him out of the window. They found blood in the room and a broken chair.

"But he didn't!" Her whisper broke almost into a scream. "I know he didn't." She gulped and jabbed angrily at her tears. "Will—what *can* we do for Sam?"

His own hand trembling, Barbee stroked her tangled, golden head.

"We'll try, Nora." He paused to consider, abruptly lifted his head. "You know, I've got a hunch I can find Sam." His voice was low and excited. "Suppose you gather up some things for me to take him. Rough clothing, boots, sleeping bag—the light equipment he had on the expedition. I'll get some food on the way."

On his arm, her fingers tightened desperately.

"Where is he, Will?"

"Just a reporter's hunch," Barbee said. "Even if I'm right, it's better if you don't know. The police will be here again. Why don't you write him a note?"

Her fingers slowly relaxed, suddenly tensed again.

"The police won't follow you?"

"A reporter has an excuse to go anywhere." He faced her gravely. "Nora, there's a frightful thing about to happen. We've got to help Sam. Not just for his own sake. But because he's our one hope against—it."

She nodded slowly.

"I know, Will." Her eyes were wide and dark, and she shuddered. "Sam wouldn't tell me. But I've known. Since the day the *Clipper* came in. It's something waiting just out of sight, silent and grinning and hideous."

BARBEE LOOKED to see that the prowl car was not on the street and hastily carried the pack out to his car. He stopped at a market to get flour and bacon and sugar and coffee. He drove south on the river road, west on the new State highway. He turned north on a rutted dirt road toward the hills.

He knew where Sam would be.

Driving, he had time to analyze the hunch. Sam was an outdoor man. He had roughed it on three continents, and his boyhood had been spent on the ranch in these same hills. His instinct would be to seek them.

Sam had no car—his own had been wrecked on Sardis Hill, and apparently none had been stolen. Barbee calculated briefly. Starting at one thirty, and burdened with the green box, Sam couldn't have made more than fifteen miles. He drew a mental circle—and the very spot flashed into his mind.

One Thanksgiving, when he, Rex and Sam were riding in these hills, they had glimpsed a bare, iron-reddened cliff above Laurel Canyon, and Sam pointed out the smoky streak that betrayed an Indian cave.

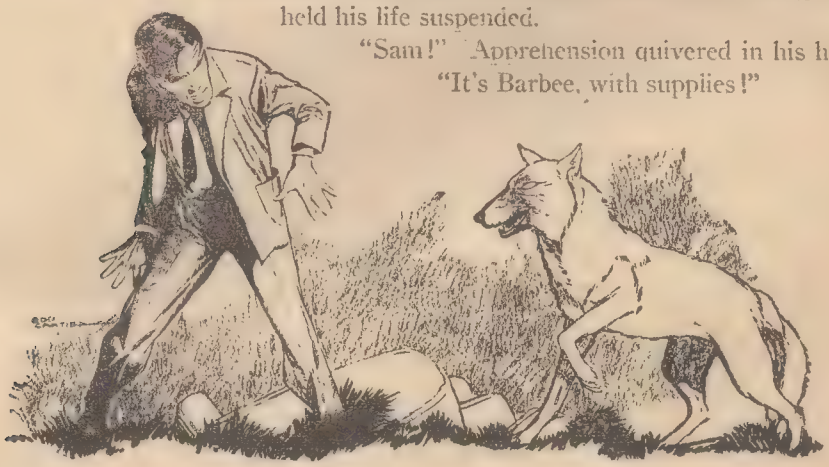
That was the place!

Perhaps there were flaws in the reasoning. That didn't matter. The hunch had told him where to find Sam. The rest was just a bungling effort to explain to himself how he knew.

Twice he parked on side roads for an hour, watching and listening to be sure he was not followed. It was noon when he reached Bear Canyon. Clouds had hidden the sun, and a rising north wind promised rain. He left the car hidden and started his three-mile tramp with the pack.

Ascending Laurel Canyon, he walked boldly in the open. To attempt to stalk the cave would be surely fatal. Dull human senses brought him no information. But a sure intuition told him that Sam Quain held his life suspended.

"Sam!" Apprehension quivered in his hail. "It's Barbee, with supplies!"



He gulped a deep breath of relief when the fugitive stepped out of a red-splashed clump of scrub oak beside the trail. His haggard, bronze head was bare, his shirt muddy and torn. His hard body drooped and trembled with exhaustion, but the big revolver was steady in his hand.

"Will! What the devil are you doing here?"

"I brought some things you need," Barbee said hastily. "Don't worry, my trail is safe. Nora sent a note."

Sam Quain's drawn, red-stubbled face was hard and suspicious.

"I ought to kill you, Will." His voice was hoarse and rusty and strange. "I should have killed you long ago. But you saved my life last night. The things you have brought may save it again."

Barbee tramped ahead until the gun beckoned him to stop.

"Can't you trust me, Sam?" he begged. "Won't you tell me, so that I can help? I want to know. Yesterday I went to Glennhaven. I thought I was losing my mind. But it's more than insanity."

Quain's red-rimmed eyes narrowed watchfully.

"A good deal more," his hard voice grated.

The clouds had lowered about the peaks. Now the north wind was suddenly fresh and damp. Thunder crashed and echoed in the upper canyon. Huge raindrops spattered on the fallen leaves, splashed icily on their faces.

At last, reluctantly, Sam Quain gestured with the gun.

"Come on out of the storm." It was a weary mutter. "I suppose it can't do much harm to tell you."

THE CAVE was invisible from below. To reach it they climbed half-obliterated steps in a water-cut chimney, where one man could hold off a hundred. It was a long, horizontal fissure, dug by the chisel of time between two strata of hard sandstone. The roof was black with smoke of ancient fires. Hidden in the deepest corner, Barbee saw the battered wooden box from Asia.

When he had got back his breath from the climb, Barbee opened the pack, made coffee on the tiny primus stove, opened a can of beans. Using the green box for a table, Sam Quain ate and drank avidly. He kept the gun in his hand, and his red, watchful eyes roved back and forth between Barbee and the slope below.

The clouds thickened as he ate. The blue-gray ceiling dropped lower about the peaks. Thunder boomed and rumbled in the gorge below, and cold raindrops splashed into the cave. He finished, and Barbee prompted:

"Now, tell me."

"Do you really want to know?" Sam Quain's feverish eyes scanned him. "The knowledge will haunt you, Will. It will make the world into a menagerie of horrors. It will point unspeakable suspicions at every friend you have. It may kill you."

"I want to know," Barbee said.

Watchfully, his hand on the gun, Sam Quain asked: "Do you remember what Mondrick was saying when he was murdered?"

"So he was murdered?" Barbee said softly. "And the means was a little black kitten—garroted?"

Quain's pale, unshaven face went slack. His mouth hung open. His glittering, bloodshot eyes went dark with terror. The gun jerked up in his hand and he rasped hoarsely:

"How did you know that?"

"I saw the kitten," Barbee said. "Several things happened that I don't understand." He drew back uneasily from the green box. "I remember the last words Mondrick said. 'It was a hundred thousand years ago—'"

The hard, blue glare of lightning made the gloom of the storm seem thicker. Rain drummed on the ledge outside, and a cold mist drifted into the cave. Quain waited for the echoing crash of thunder to subside before his worn, hoarse voice resumed:

"It was a time when men lived in such settings as this." He nodded into the smoke-blackened cave. "A time when they lived in a state of endless terror that is still reflected in our myths and our superstitions and our dreams. For they were hunted and haunted by that other, older race that Mondrick called Homo lycanthropus."

Barbee started, muttering:

"Werewolf-man?"

"Wolf-man," said Quain. "So named for certain distinguishing characters of skull and teeth—characters you see every day." His hollow eyes were uncomfortably searching. "Perhaps a better name would have been witch man."

BARBEE FELT a prickling over his skin. The cave was cold, and icy drops began dripping from the roof. Sam moved the green box.

"This older race had developed mental powers beyond those of men," he went on. "Mondrick wasn't sure of their precise extent. Such powers as we call telepathy, clairvoyance, prophecy. Perhaps others. There is evidence that they were able to control and destroy, at a distance, by some vital projection from their bodies. Mondrick believed, from his studies of witchcraft and lycanthropy, that they were able to take animal forms."

Barbee shuddered. He was glad he hadn't told Sam about his dreams. A certain intuition told him that Sam would have killed him for them. He looked uneasily into the drumming rain.

"For tens of thousands of years, the evidence shows," Sam Quain went on, "the witch folk were the enemies and the cruel masters of men. They were the priests and the evil gods. It was an incredible, degrading, cannibalistic oppression. You can find the details in every mythology, and in your own nightmares.

"But men revolted. The witch folk were numerous, and perhaps the ages had sapped their racial vigor. The hardier human tribes, following the retreating glaciers, escaped for a time. They domesticated the dog—a stanch ally. And somehow they devised another weapon. I have it here."

He touched the green box, and Barbee remembered the white plaster cast of a work-cracked stone disk in his last dream, from which Nick Spivak had been working so desperately to read the inscription.

"Men won," Quain went on. "After endless, frightful wars, the witch folk were exterminated. But the blood of the conquerors was no longer pure." He leaned over the green box, and lightning showed the grim tension of his haggard face. "That was Mondrick's great discovery.

"We're hybrids."

Barbee caught his breath and waited.

"It's hard to understand," Quain said, "when the two races were such enemies. Mondrick believed that the daughters of the subject race were forced to take part in frightful ceremonies, of which the witch's Sabbath is a memory. Perhaps the witch folk saw the danger of revolt and tried to dilute the blood and the strength of men. Anyhow, it happened."

Against the far roll of thunder, his weary voice had become a terrible droning chant:

"Down out of the past, that black river of alien blood flows in the veins of men. A black and monstrous racial memory haunts our unconscious minds. It is a shadow that is thickening. The cunning of the witch folk is about to win the old war of the races, after all!"

Barbee sat up on the cold damp stone. He shivered and opened his mouth and said nothing.

"It's stunning, at first," Quain said. "But you can't escape the evidence. Mondrick found it in every field of knowledge. Jupiter of the Greeks, carrying away the daughters of men. The witch finders of the Zulus. The inmates of our prisons and asylums. Blood groups and cephalic indices. Rhine's ESP experiments. Freud's exploration of the unconscious. Not to mention the exhibits we have here."

He touched the green box.

"But," muttered Barbee, "if the witch folk were exterminated—"

"WILL, you are familiar with the laws of Mendel," Sam Quain said. "You know that recessive characters can be transmitted, undetected, from generation to generation—until at last the chance re-combination of the genes reproduces the ancestral type.

"A simple example is the inheritance of the recessive gene that makes deaf-mutes. Normal hybrid deaf-mutes can't be distinguished from the completely normal people—unless two of them marry. But only one child in four will be completely normal. Two, on the average, will be normal hybrids. The unfortunate fourth will be a deaf-mute.

"In the same way, throwbacks to the witch-folk type appear continually in our hybrid breed. Many genes are involved, and the case is more complicated. Literally millions of variations are possible between the pure human and pure lycanthropus.

"Those who are perhaps one sixteenth witch folk display such powers

as ESP. They are 'psychic.' Often moody and unhappy—because of that unconscious racial conflict. They are your religious fanatics, your mediums, your split personalities, your pathological criminals. The exception may be a genius. You know your hybrids.

"Those born with a stronger inheritance are usually better aware of their powers—and more careful to hide them. In the Middle Ages they used to be hanged or burned. Nowadays they are far more clever and powerful. They must spend a lot of their time cultivating the modern scientific skepticism of everything supernatural—even that's a propaganda word that really means superhuman.

"Some outstanding individuals are perhaps approximately quarter-breeds. They have increased perceptions, some bungling and half-unconscious use of those ancestral powers, some of the vigor of hybrids. The key to their lives is the conflict of two races. Evil, mingled with good, fighting good and cloaked with good—their twisted lives take strange directions."

Barbee was gaining understanding. It made the chill of the storm-darkened cave more gripping. "The full-blood witches?"

"From the mathematics of heredity," Sam Quain told him, "it is clear that even half-breeds will be born only once in millions of births—perhaps one to the generation. They will be too clever to be suspected. Especially in such a country as this, where the real instruments of power are newspaper chains and banks and holding companies and legislative lobbies."

Quain's haggard face showed grim as lightning flashed again.

"Yet we know that there is at least one alive today who has a vast heritage of that evil power. A veiled satan, he moves among unsuspecting mankind, plotting to restore the black, dead dominion of his kind."

"The Black Messiah!" Barbee shivered to the north wind's chill. "But how can the witch folk come back to power," he protested faintly, "when they are born only by chance?"

"Hundreds of years ago," Quain told him grimly, "the throwbacks began to gather into a secret clan. By mating among themselves, they upset the random odds. Naturally, the witch folk knew of their own existence long before we became aware of it. Having the powers of their black breed, it's easier for them to detect the hidden strain in others, detect it in 'humans' that may not know it is in them. They are using the modern science of selective breeding to filter out their human blood and so give birth to the awaited powerful leader that Mondrick called the Black Messiah."

Looking at the green box, Barbee gulped and croaked: "May I see . . . what's inside?"

Sam Quain's hand came down the box and he touched the gun.

"It's proof of all I have told you," he said. "An almost complete skeleton of Homo lycanthropus. Charred, cracked human bones from the same deposit. Some other things. A weapon that defeated the witch folk once—and will again!" His voice was strained and grim. "But I won't show you now."

"Who—" Barbee tried to swallow, and grated, "Who is the Black Messiah?"

"He might be you. By that," Sam Quain said, "I mean he might be anybody. We do know something of the appearance of thoroughbred witch folk—pointed ears and rounded skulls and low-growing hair and strong, peculiar teeth. But physical and mental characters are not always linked, and even the Black Messiah may be no more than a half-breed."

His voice was dull with brooding horror.

"That's why I came out here, Will. I can't stand—people. Some of them are human. But I've no way of distinguishing the monsters. I was never quite sure that Nick or Rex wasn't a spy of the enemy. It seems hideous to say, but I've wondered even about Nora—"

His sick voice trailed away.

BARBEE TRIED to stop his shivering. He wanted to ask how a witch could snare a normal man and how he could escape her spells. But he knew that Sam Quail would kill him if he asked all the questions in his mind.

"You'll let me help you, Sam?" he asked huskily. "To find the Black Messiah and expose him?"

"That was Mondrick's idea." Sam Quain shook his unkempt head. "It might have worked—four hundred years ago. But now the witches in university laboratories can prove there are no witches. The witches who publish papers can make a fool of one who says there are. The witches in the government can put him out of the way."

Barbee stared into the stormy dusk.

"Then—what can we do?"

It was a long time before Sam Quain moved in the damp, cold gloom that filled the cave, and said:

"I'll tell you my plan." His tired voice was low and grim. "I'm going to fight fire with fire. It's the only way. Mondrick and Rex tried to tell thousands—and died. I am going to gather a small, secret group, one at a time. That doesn't require that I identify the hybrids—but merely that I find a few who don't belong to that secret cabal. Still, it will be a desperate fight, with all the odds against us. But it's the only way."

Water dripped in the silent cave. Barbee shivered to the damp, creeping chill. With a pitiless and terrible illumination, Sam Quain's words seemed to dissolve all the old painful riddles of the world and his own life. In a faint, uneasy voice, he asked:

"Sam—do you think—am I a hybrid?"

He caught his breath as Sam Quain nodded.

"Probably you are, Will. While the human blood predominates, a thousand to one, nearly every individual is slightly tainted—enough to cause some unconscious conflict with that buried racial memory. That is the curse of mankind." He shuddered. "I've wondered, Will—even about myself."

"Thanks, Sam!" Barbee gulped. "Now—can I help with your plan?"

The hollowed, glittering eyes searched him again.

"All right, Will." Quain nodded at last. "You have already helped. Now perhaps you can make a few contacts with the future members of our secret legion. They must be carefully picked. They must have money, or political power, or scientific skill. They can't be weaklings. This job is tough enough to kill the best man alive. And—"

His feverish eyes flashed hard at Will.

"—they can't be witches! Because one traitor would destroy us all. We have no test—Mondrick thought he had one when he picked Nick and Rex and me, but later it failed him. We'll have to take a chance. The risk is ghastly. But there's no other way."

"Have you anybody in mind?" Barbee considered. "Such a man as Dr. Glenn? He's a scientist—a grim materialist. He has a reputation and a good deal of money."

But Sam Quain shook his head.

"Glenn's just the type we can't trust. The type who is always laughing at witchcraft. It may be because he is a witch himself. No, the first man on my list is your employer."

"Preston Troy?" Barbee was a little astonished. "He does have millions and a lot of political drag. But he's no saint. He's in the city hall ring up to his neck. His wife has locked him out of her room for the last ten years, and he's keeping half the pretty women in Clarendon."

"Including some certain one?"

Sam's grim face showed a passing glint of amusement.

"That doesn't matter," he said soberly. "Mondrick used to say that most saints are about one eighth lycanthropus—their saintliness just an overcompensation for the taint of evil. Suppose you tackle Troy tonight?"

Barbee rose stiffly, stooping under the black roof, and took Sam's hard, tense hand.

"Two of us," he whispered, "against the Black Messiah!"

"But we'll find others. We must!" Quain's tired shoulders straightened. "Because hell itself—every legend of men degraded and tortured by demons—is only a memory of the witch folk's reign."

IX.

Barbee left Sam Quain crouched watchfully on his sleeping bag beside the green box in the damp, chill darkness of the cave—how weary and feeble a champion of mankind against that secret threat!

The dusk was almost gone by the time he reached his car. But he drove without lights, blindly groping his way through the cold, gray drizzle of rain until he was back on the highway. It was eight when he parked his car beside Troy's mansion at Trojan Hills.

Barbee knew his way about the house, for he had been there often on

political jobs. He let himself in through the side entrance and rapped on the door of Troy's second-story den. Troy's rasping voice asked who the devil he was. After a little delay, it said: "Come in."

The den was a huge room, with a mahogany bar across one end, decorated with hunting trophies and long-limbed, luscious nudes in oil. An aura of stale cigar smoke and financial importance always hung in it, and Troy boasted that more history had been made here than in the governor's mansion.

The first thing Barbee saw was a white fur jacket on the back of a chair. He knew it was April Bell's. His hands tried to clench, and it was a moment before he could breathe.

"Well, Barbee?" In shirt sleeves, with a fresh cigar in his mouth, Troy stood beside a long desk littered with papers and ash trays and empty glasses. His massive blue-jowled face looked surprised. "I thought you were at Glennhaven."

"I was, chief." Barbee made himself look away from April's coat and tried to smooth his voice. "Chief, I've got a story—a terrible, tremendous thing. Will you listen to me?"

"Wait." Troy went behind the bar and mixed two Scotch-and-sodas and brought them back to the desk. "Shoot."

In a hurried, nervous, earnest voice, Barbee began to tell what Sam Quain had told him. Troy's cigar went out. His big-mouthed face was poker grim. Barbee couldn't read anything in his shrewd, narrow eyes. At last he laced his fingers together in front of his paunch and rumbled:

"So you want me to join you against this Black Messiah?"

"That's what we want."

Troy chewed the dead cigar.

"Maybe you aren't crazy, Barbee!" An excitement seemed to burn behind his hard, ruddy mask. "This thing might explain a lot. Why you like some people on sight. Why you hate others—because you sense that veiled evil in them."

His big head moved decisively.

"I'll go with you tonight and listen to Quain and see what he's got in that box. If he's as convincing as you are, I'm with you, Barbee—to my last cent and my last gasp. Just give me half an hour to get ready. I'll tell Rhodora that I can't go with her to the refugee children's bazaar. Use the bath if you want to wash up."

Barbee was appalled by what he saw in the bathroom mirror. He looked gaunt and tired and bearded and begrimed and torn as Sam Quain had been. And there was something else—something subtly unpleasant. He wondered if the glass were faintly discolored and slightly curved, so that it distorted his image. He was certain that he didn't look quite like that.

It was a hunch that made him hurry back into the den and pick up the telephone on Troy's desk. He was in time to hear the heavy voice giving instructions.

"Parker? I've just got a tip on the murderer. He's hiding in a cave up Laurel Canyon. Better surround it right away. And don't forget the *Star's* publicity gag—we're offering five hundred dollars for the first look in that green box."

"O. K., chief," the sheriff said.

CAREFULLY, Barbee replaced the receiver. The lush nudes on the walls danced fantastically, and a chill, gray mist thickened in the long room. He knew that he had betrayed Sam Quain—perhaps even to the Black Messiah.

For this was his fault. He had been afraid to tell Sam that April Bell was a witch, that Troy was intimate with her. It was too late now. Or was it? A new grim purpose steadied him.

He walked swiftly out of the den and hurried silently down the back stairs. He got out of the house and reached his car. With his heart thudding painfully, he started it as silently as he could and drove to the highway before he snapped on the lights. He turned south and inched up the speed.

Perhaps he could reach the cave in time to warn Sam. It might be that they could carry the green box back to the car, and escape the sheriff's net together. Now that Troy knew Sam's plan, they must go far from Clarendon. Because Troy might be the Black Messiah.

The lightning had ceased with the fall of night, but the north wind blew steadily, laden with fine, cold rain. The windshield wipers slowed as he stepped on the gas, and it was difficult to see the wet road. He remembered that one back tire had a boot in it, and held his speed to fifty. Even a blowout could mean Sam Quain's final defeat.

He was slowing for the intersection with the mountain highway when suddenly he knew that he was being followed. He braked to an abrupt halt and peered behind him. Twin points of feral green winked at him out of the wet dark.

He knew he was awake. Perhaps, after all, he was insane. But those were the eyes of the white werewolf of his nightmares. April Bell was following him to kill Sam Quain. Now he couldn't go back with his warning. The Black Messiah had won.

Barbee felt ill again with a beaten despair. It was no more than a blind and helpless panic that spurred him to start the car again. He swung east, off the river road, instead of west. He lurched over the bridge at sixty and turned back toward Clarendon on the valley highway beyond the river.

The headlamps made a white blur in the rain. He saw a strange procession marching through it. Mondrick's blind wife, tall and proud and silent in her grief. Old Ben Chittum, fumbling with gnarled, quivering hands to light his pipe, dead inside. Mama Spivak, clinging to the little tailor, thinly wailing. Nora, with her blond hair disheveled and her round, freckled face swollen with tears, leading little Pat, who was trying stubbornly not to weep.

He pushed the needle up to seventy. The vacuum-driven wipers almost

stopped. Rain blurred the windshield. The roaring car lurched and swayed on the wet pavement, flung wings of water out of puddles. A farm truck with no light burst suddenly out of the mist. He whipped around it on shrieking tires.

But the white wolf shape, he knew, still followed him.

And the nightmares haunted him. Once again he was the huge gray wolf, cracking the vertebrae of Pat's little Jiminy Cricket in his jaws, and stealing into Sam Quain's house. He was the saber-tooth, leaping tirelessly up Sardis Hill with the naked witch astride him, slashing Rex Chittum's throat. He was the great snake, squeezing out Nick Spivak's life.

He watched the mist-blurred mirror, looking for the green eyes of April Bell. For a terrible queer eagerness was growing, beside his dread. In the corner of the mirror was a little sticker cut in the outline of a *pterosaur*—it was the emblem of an oil company, marked with the mileage when the car had been greased. The image of that winged reptile began to haunt Barbee.

He felt a swelling mad desire to stop the car and change himself into some giant flying saurian and soar away into freedom from all this unendurable confusion of maddening troubles—with April Bell.

That urge was insanity, and he fought it grimly.

Like a wild thing shut in a treadmill cage, his fevered mind ran on endlessly and reached no goal. Had April snared him with black magic—or merely with a normal woman's lure? Was he maniac or murderer or neither? Could Sam Quain have really been the killer, all his story of the witch folk a fantastic invention? Or was it truth and Troy the Black Messiah?

He tramped harder on the gas.

It was just as Sam had warned him. Knowledge of the witch folk was horror and madness. Now he could never rest. He could find no safety. Any witch would kill him just because he knew. Any person might be a witch. He had betrayed his knowledge to the Black Messiah. The witch folk would hunt him until he was dead.

He had slowed to fifty for the long curve east of Clarendon when the tire blew out. A blur of crashing disaster and the car spun in the air, tortured metal screaming hideously in mockery of human pain. In one dreadful second it was over; the wreckage stopped on its side in a pool of mud and shattered glass in the ditch.

Barbee dragged himself out. He was shaken and breathless and bruised and sick and trembling. His clothing was muddy and torn. But he wasn't bleeding anywhere, and no bones were broken.

He stumbled back to the edge of the pavement. The cold north wind whipped the drizzle into his scratched face, and he shivered in his wet clothing. Somewhere behind him the white wolf howled. It was a thin, eerie, quavering wail, and he thought it was the voice of April Bell.

He saw her green, luminous eyes silently approaching.

A trembling paralysis of fear seized him. Shuddering, he broke it. He

snatched up a handful of gravel from the road shoulder and hurled it futilely toward her. Hoarsely he croaked: "Get away from me—damn you!"

Winking maliciously, the green eyes vanished. Down the wind, a dog yelped and began to howl fearfully. Barbee turned away from the wrecked car and started walking toward the north bridge.

That frantic flight, he realized, had been taking him unconsciously back toward Nora. But the campus was still half a dozen miles away, and Glennhaven lay only a mile beyond the bridge. Suddenly he knew that he must stop there. Glennhaven was the one possible refuge left to him—even if it offered only the false peace of insanity.

He was aching with bruises and exhaustion, chilled and numb and reeling. Only one car passed him, and the driver refused to halt. With head down, he tramped on steadily—if he stopped to rest he knew he couldn't go on again.

On the bridge he heard the soft patter of the white wolf's feet and looked back to see that she was close behind. Almost he was too tired to care. In a weary, baffled voice he muttered:

"Damn you, April, why don't you leave me be? You know I'm not asleep."

She waited for him to go on, with one graceful forefoot lifted. Her sensitive ears were pricked up watchfully. She was grinning, with her red tongue out. A malicious but not unkind amusement shone in her green eyes.

Once he fell on his face in a muddy field. He felt too numb to mind the cold any longer, and it was good to rest. He wanted to sleep. But the white she-wolf was waiting eagerly, with ears lifted. He knew that she would change him if he slept. He spurred his leaden body to rise and staggered on.

At last he reeled between the massive stone pillars at the entrance to Glennhaven. Lights were still on in Glenn's big dwelling. He stumbled up the walk and leaned on the bell. Glenn himself came to the door. His tanned handsome face showed only faint surprise.

"Well, Barbee, we've been expecting you back."

"Doctor," croaked Barbee, "I've got to talk to you!"

Glenn's heavy-lidded eyes surveyed his drenched, tattered, swaying figure.

"You look all in," he said. "Suppose you go back to your room. Take a hot bath and have them bring you something hot to drink. Sleep on it. And I'll see you early in the morning."

"Sleep?" Barbee echoed hoarsely. "I can't sleep. I don't dare. Because a white she-wolf is waiting for me there on the lawn. You can't see her, but listen to the dogs howling down the wind! I'll change, if I sleep, and go to her."

Glenn merely waited in the doorway, his brown face bland and smooth.

"The wolf is April Bell," Barbee croaked. "She murdered Mondrick. She made me kill Rex and Nick. Now she's waiting for me again." His teeth chattered. "She wants me to change and come with her to murder Sam Quain."

Glenn shrugged a little, and his deep voice was soothing. "You're tired and excited. Let me give you something so that you can sleep—"

"I won't take it!" Barbee's ragged protest rose almost to a scream. "I'm going to tell you right now—what Sam Quain told me." Clutching the door facing to hold himself upright, dripping muddy pools on the mat, he launched desperately into the story: "Mondrick discovered that the human race is a hybrid mixture—"

GLENN LISTENED, his brown face sleepy-looking and inscrutable. Barbee was too far gone to trouble himself with Quain's suspicion that Glenn might be a witch. The old, strange sense of confident liking ruled him. All he wanted was the reassuring aid of Glenn's competent, skeptical, scientific mind.

"Now, doctor!" A kind of bleak triumph broke into his husky whisper as he finished. "What do you say?"

Deliberately, with the old gesture, Glenn fitted the capable brown fingers of his two hands together.

"You're ill, Barbee," his deep voice said soberly. "Remember that. You're too ill to see things clearly. Your story of Homo lycanthropus is a kind of warped, hysterical parallel to the truth. Men are really descended from savage animals. We've all inherited traits that are no longer useful in civilization. Interesting throwbacks do occur."

Barbee straightened his reeling body grimly.

"But they're hunting Sam right now," he gasped. "Think of Nora, and little Pat." He looked uneasily behind him, and the wolf's green eyes winked out of the shadows. "Don't let me sleep, doctor," he begged, "or I'll change and murder Sam!"

"Suavely, Glenn protested: "Won't you try to understand? Your fear of sleep is merely your fear of those unconscious wishes that sleep sets free. It may well be that the witch of your dreams is merely your guilty love of Nora Quain, and your thoughts of murder the consequence of an unconscious jealous hatred of Sam." Barbee gasped, trembling with silent wrath. "You'll just have to learn to accept those ideas," Glenn told him. "There's nothing unique about them. All people express them—"

"All people," Barbee grated hoarsely, "are tainted with the witch folk's blood!"

Glenn nodded calmly.

"Your expression of a fundamental truth."

Barbee heard movement on the walk behind him and turned in a startled way. But it wasn't the white wolf. It was horse-faced Nurse Graulitz and muscular Nurse Hellar. He looked accusingly back at Glenn.

"Go with them, Barbee," the tall doctor urged him soothingly. "They'll just help you get to sleep—"

"But I won't!" Barbee sobbed. "I won't—"

The two white-starched Amazons seized his arms. Struggle was useless. Surrendering to chilled exhaustion, he reeled between them back to his room. A hot shower stopped the chattering of his teeth. The clean bed was insidiously relaxing. Nurse Graulitz stood ominously by while Nurse Hellar made him gulp hot weak tea. It had a faint, strange taste, and Nurse Graulitz boomed softly: "Now you'll go to sleep."

They left him alone.

Sleep tugged and beckoned. It was a silken web that meshed Barbee. A tireless yielding line that drew unceasingly. A ruthless pressure, a driving wind, a soothing perfume. It was a siren voice, singing. It was a screaming agony of need.

But he would not yield.

Something made him look at the closed door. It didn't open. But the white wolf trotted through the panels. She sat down on her haunches in the middle of the room and looked at him with amused, expectant eyes. Her red tongue lolled beside her shining fangs.

"Go away," he whispered faintly. "I'm not going to sleep."

She replied in the soft, velvet voice of April Bell:

"Perhaps sleep isn't necessary. I've just talked with your father. He says that you are strong enough to change without the aid of sleep."

Barbee sat up on the side of the bed.

"My father?" he echoed blankly.

The white wolf laughed silently at his surprise.

"Hasn't he told you?"

"Luther Barbee was a bricklayer," Barbee said. "He died three months before I was born."

Her slender white head nodded.

"But your mother's marriage to him was cruelly unhappy. She came to Dr. Glenn as a patient nearly a year before her husband was killed in a saloon brawl. You are Glenn's son."

Barbee blinked at her.

"I felt somehow kin to him," he muttered. "It might be—" He half rose, trembling. "My God, this is insanity! Leave me alone, damn you—or I'll scream!"

She laughed at him noiselessly, ears pricked up.

"Go ahead and scream. Nurse Hellar can't see me."

Barbee didn't scream. For two minutes he sat on the edge of the bed, watching the bright-eyed, expectant wolf. If she were all hallucination, she was still a remarkably vivid and graceful and malicious one.

"You followed me from Troy's," he accused her suddenly. "I know you were there. I saw your white coat on a chair in his den."

"So what?" Her green eyes danced. "I was waiting for you, Will."

"I saw him go into your apartment with his own key." Barbee's voice was shaking. "What is he to you, April? Is he your master? Is he the Black Messiah?"

The white wolf laughed again. She trotted to him and put her graceful white paws on his trembling knees. Her green eyes were more than ever human—April's. They looked eager and glad and yet faintly mocking, and they were wet with tears.

"So that's why you ran from me, Will?"

Hoarsely he muttered: "Maybe it is."

"Then I'll have to tell you, Will." Her cold muzzle kissed him. "Troy's my father. What I told you about the dairyman is true. But mother had been Troy's secretary before she married, and when she found herself unhappy she began seeing him again. The dairyman suspected. That's why he hated me so bitterly—why he was so anxious to believe that I was a witch. Preston was always generous. He sent money to us in California. He has done a lot for me since mother died." Her green eyes mocked him. "So you were jealous, Will."

His trembling hand touched her silky white fur.

"All right, I was." He gulped. "April, I'm glad—"

THE DOOR swung open. Nurse Hellar peered into the room with an expression of mild reproof on her broad face.

"Really, Mr. Barbee," she admonished. "You'll catch cold if you sit up all night talking to yourself. Let me tuck you in bed." She started resolutely across toward him, and the white wolf nipped at her muscular ankle. "Gracious—what did I stumble against?" She peered at the empty carpet beside the silent, red-grinning wolf, and then at Barbee. In a rather shaken voice, she threatened: "If you aren't in bed when I come back—"

She went out, and the laughing wolf said: "Now it is time for us to go."

Uneasily, Barbee asked: "Where?"

"Your friend, Sam Quain, is about to get away from the sheriff," said the silken voice of April Bell. "He's climbing a trail they don't know about —up the cliff instead of down—and carrying the green box with him. We've got to stop him."

"I won't—" he muttered grimly. "Not even if I am bewitched."

"But you aren't." Gently, the white she-wolf rubbed a silken shoulder against his knees. "Don't you see, Will, that you are one of us?"

"You mean that Mondrick was right?" He gulped. "That I'm a throwback—to lycanthropus?"

"You are one of us." Her green eyes danced. "I should tell you that the full development of our power is usually very slow. Our gifts tend to lie unused and even unsuspected. Your father has been very successful in awakening our latent racial consciousness."

"My father—Glenn?" Barbee clutched at the head of the bed. "But he's a scientist, a materialist—" His voice dried up as he remembered Sam Quain's suspicion. Shivering, he whispered faintly: "Is Glenn the Black Messiah?"

"He is one of us," she told him. "But he isn't the leader we have been waiting for so long. Nor is Preston. Nor am I. None of us has a heritage that equals your own, Will. It may be that your awakening strength can lead us back to our lost dominion."

"I?" Shocked to frozen rigidity, Barbee clung with sweaty hands to the bed. "I—the Black Messiah?"

"You're our leader, Will," she told him softly. "Until a stronger one can take your place. You and I are the most powerful in generations. But perhaps a child of ours will be stronger yet." She dropped to all fours again and looked up at him with shining eyes. "Now we must go!"

Barbee released the iron rail with clammy fingers. He let his tired body flow. It was easier than it had ever been, for the first awkwardness and pain was gone. And a new, savage strength came into him with the change.

Beside him the white wolf altered also. She rose to her hind feet and grew taller. The flowing curves of her body filled, and the fur was gone, and she flung the shining red hair back of her bare shoulders. With a fierce eagerness, Barbee gathered the slim woman to him in his leathery wings and

kissed her cool, tender lips with the giant saurian's snout.

Laughing, she gave his hard scaled head a ringing slap. She slipped out of his infolding wings and sprang astride his leathery back. "We've your old friend to take care of, first."

He looked at the reinforced window, and it melted out of its frame. He slithered through it, with April crouching low upon him, and perched with his mighty talons gripping the sill. It was good to be strong and free again, and he liked the warm, soft pressure of the girl astride him.

Behind, Nurse Hellar came back into the room. She straightened his stiff, sprawled body on the bed and drew the blankets over it. Snapping out the lights, she murmured triumphantly: "I thought you'd sleep!"

Barbee spread huge wings and launched himself from the wet window sill. The night was still clouded, and the steady wind still carried a thin, cold rain out of the north. But the shape of things was clear to his new senses, the damp chill was merely stimulating, and all his old fatigue was gone. He beat the rain-washed air with long, easy strokes, soaring westward.

A frightened dog howled beneath them, and Barbee silenced it with a hissing scream. A joyous strength beat in his wings. This was life. The old conflicts and frustrations were all left behind. Now at last he was free.

They mounted into the west. Lights of cars moved on the flanks of the dark hills below, lanterns swung, and flashlights made furtive gleams. But all the streams were raging high from heavy rainfall in the hills. Bridges were out, fords perilous with white water and grinding boulders. The sheriff's men were halted.

Barbee soared far over them. He glided down, above the dull, angry roar of swollen Laurel Creek. April's slim, bare arm pointed and he saw Sam Quain. With the green box on his shoulder, he was high on the narrow, unguessed trail that twisted breathtakingly above the mad white water.

"Wait!" April Bell's voice held a chuckle of wild, free joy in living. "Perhaps he'll fall."

Barbee deliberately soared above the canyon. Still he felt admiration for a brave and dangerous enemy. Defying long exhaustion, Sam was making a splendid effort. Against lesser odds, he might have had a chance.

For at last, using half obliterated steps that the Indians must have cut, he reached the top of the cliff. He rested for only a moment, panting. Then, with a stubborn, weary strength he lifted the battered wooden box to his shoulders again.

"Now!" cried April Bell.

With black, silent wings half folded, Barbee dived.

Sam Quain seemed suddenly aware of the danger. He stumbled back from the sheer precipice. His haggard face looked up, slowly twisting into a grimy, red-stubbled mask of horror. His mouth opened, and Barbee thought he heard his own name, shouted in a tone of utmost anguish:

"You—Will—"

The talons of the pterosaur caught the iron-bound box. The Stone within it numbed them with its queer deadly chill. His wings were paralyzed. But Barbee hung on grimly. The box was torn out of Sam Quain's clutching hands, flung over the cliff.

Barbee fell with it for a space. With a last spasmodic effort he contrived to unfasten his frozen talons, thrust it from him. Far below, it struck a ledge, burst into a shower of splinters.

Barbee saw scraps of paper, dissolving bits of yellow bones, the fragments of the shattered Stone. They all went down into the grinding chaos of foam and mud and rocks in the swollen creek.

Life came back to Barbee's wings. He spread them again and checked his fall. Stunned and shaken, he came down on the rocky slope beyond the roaring stream. April Bell slipped off his back.

"You were splendid, Will!" Her voice was heady champagne. "The Stone in the box was our only real danger, and now it is destroyed forever. But none of us save you alone could approach that thing; its power paralyzed us all before we could do anything." The caress of her warm, white fingers was electric against his heaving, scaly flank. "Now we have only to kill Sam Quain."

CLINGING with trembling talons to the rock where he had landed, Barbee shook his long armored head.

"What harm can Sam do?" he demanded. "The box held his only weapon and all his proof. He's a fugitive from the law, suspected of three murders. Now that the box is gone his story is pure insanity."

He reached for the red-haired girl with a leathery wing.

"Suppose he does get away? Suppose he even manages to tell his story? I don't think the newspapers, or the radio, or the scientific magazines would touch it, but he might somehow get it printed by some unwary publisher—perhaps under some pretense that it was only fiction. But even if he did, who would believe?

"Who would dare believe?"

The pterosaur shrugged, with black, folded wings.

"Let him go—for Nora's sake."

"So it's Nora Quain again!"

April Bell's smooth white body shrank beneath his caressing pinion. She dropped to all fours, and silky fur covered her. Her red head grew long and pointed, with alert ears lifted. Only the green, malicious eyes of the white she-wolf were the same, alight with a gay, mocking challenge.

"Wait for me, April!"

With a red, silent laugh she ran from him up the dark wooded slope where his broad wings could not follow. But the change was easy now. Barbee let the saurian's body flow into the shape of a huge gray wolf. He picked up her exciting scent and followed her into the shadows.

THE END.

THRESHOLD

by HENRY KUTTNER

● A very nice bargain he made—murder without penalty—wealth—the payment the demon asked was a minor thing—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

It was quiet in the comfortable little apartment, twelve stories above the traffic of Central Park West. Venetian blinds reflected soft lights. Conventional prints were on the walls, a neutral-colored rug on the floor, and a decanter of whiskey was amber and crystal in Haggard's hand as he reflected ironically on the setting. Distinctly out of place, he thought, for an experiment in black magic.

He poured liquor for Stone, who had just arrived, out of breath and puffing nervously on a cigarette. The young attorney leaned forward in his chair and accepted the glass.

"You're not drinking, Steve?"

"Not tonight," said Haggard, with a twisted little smile. "Drink up."

Stone obeyed. Then he set down the glass and opened a brief case he had been holding on his lap. From it he took a flat, oblong parcel.

"Here's the book you wanted." He tossed it across the room.

Haggard didn't open the parcel. He placed it carefully on an end table, next to a capped thermos bottle standing there. His gaze lingered on the latter.

There was something innately cold about Stephen Haggard. Owner of a struggling advertising agency, he seemed quite unmoved by the trials that beset others and were apparently unable to affect him. Handsome, thirty-four, with rather thin lips and very level black gaze, he moved imperturbably through life. The man seemed incased in a gelid sheathe of some frigid stuff. He was ice and iron.

And Stone was warmth and laughter, a husky, pleasant-faced fellow slightly younger than his host, with frankness not written but printed in block letters all over him. He said, "I had a hell of a time getting the book, even after I showed 'em the letter you gave me."

"That so?" Haggard asked. He was luxuriously inhaling a cigarette, lying back in his chair and seeming completely relaxed. "That book shop can get anything—but they kept me waiting for months on this item. Incidentally, thanks a million for picking it up for me."

"That's all right," Stone smiled, but his eyes were puzzled. "Rather a rush job, eh?"

"I've been waiting for the book a long time. And I had to get"—Haggard hesitated and turned his head very slightly in the direction of the thermos bottle—"something else." As though to forestall further questions, he rose. "I'll see if Jean's ready. She takes hours to put on her face."

"All women do," Stone grinned. "I ought to thank you for letting me take Jean out tonight."

"I'll be busy—" The rest of the sentence was lost as Haggard vanished

through the door. When he came back Stone had unwrapped the oblong parcel and was examining a vellum-bound book.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Haggard remarked. "I'll fix you another drink while you're reading."

Looking slightly sheepish, Stone put down the book. "Sorry. My curiosity. You said it was an essay on magic—"

"It is, but you can't read Latin, Russ. Jean says she'll be ready soon, so there's time for a couple of highballs, anyway. There!" The glass foamed and subsided. Haggard took the volume and sat down opposite his guest, idly thumbing the pages. "I'll read you a bit, if you like. There's a warning on the flyleaf. 'Let none but the pure in heart and the . . . *fortis*—strong in will—read this book; and let no man dan-

gerously attempt to—' Well, it goes on. If you perform black magic, you're in danger of being whisked off to hell by Baal and Beelzebub."

"Going to try the stuff?" Stone asked.

Haggard didn't answer. He held his hand out before him and regarded it intently. No tremor shook it.

"What's up? Been seeing little green men? That stuff about magic makes people potty sometimes—" Stone hesitated, flushing, and then grinned. "My usual tact."

The two men laughed together. Stone went on:

"I didn't mean you, of course. But I remember a fellow I was working with went nuts after shooting all his dough on fortunetellers and quacks. He kept screaming about the fires of hell and the devils that were coming for him."

Haggard was suddenly interested. "What sort of chap was he? I mean—intelligent?"

"Yeah, up to then. Nervous as a cat, though—"

"Nervous! Nerves lead to emotion, emotion to . . . to—"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Afraid of devils, was he?" Haggard's lips curled in a contemptuous smile.

Stone finished his drink. Liquor always made him argumentative. "Well, he was batty. But it wasn't very long ago that we had witch trials not too far from New York. People have always been afraid of devils."

Haggard started to laugh. "Sure. The stupid and the neurotic."

Stone stood up, crossed the room, and took the book of magic. He thumped through it rapidly. "Here's a picture I noticed—that's enough to scare anybody who believed in it, even if it doesn't exist."

The sketch was that of a crowned, malefic head supported by ten multi-jointed and clawed legs. The title beneath it said "Asmodée."

Haggard was smiling again as he closed the book. "You're wrong, Russ. Even if Asmodeus existed, an intelligent man needn't be afraid of him—or it. Figure it out. What's a demon's resources?"

Stone poured a hasty shot. "Well—all sorts of magic. It could just wave a claw and you'd drop down to hell, eh?"

"Power," Haggard nodded. "If you stopped using your arm, what'd happen?"

"It would atrophy."

"Check. Devils had power—according to legend. But nobody ever admitted they were very smart. Why should they need to develop their brains? They could accomplish every desire by waving a claw, as you say. Wishing," said Haggard, grinning, "will make it so."

"A gorilla isn't very smart, but you wouldn't last long in a wrestling match with one."

"I'd use a gun," Haggard said logically. "Devils have only power. We've our brains. Science, psychology—hell, if Faust had gone to Harvard he could have tied Mephisto's tail into knots."

"I'm a Yale man myself," Stone murmured and got up as Jean Haggard floated into the room.

She was slim and cool and lovely, in a fragile, blond manner. In her evening gown and wrap she looked devastating.

Oddly enough, for a brief, unguarded second, a deadly viciousness showed in Haggard's eyes as he glanced at his wife. Instantly it was gone.

Jean's smile flashed. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Russ. And I'm sorry to inflict myself on you tonight at this short notice."

"My fault," Haggard grunted. "Got to work. No use Jean sticking around to listen to my moans. Enjoy yourselves, comrades."

THEY SAID they would and departed. Haggard put the safety lock on the door. Then he came back, stared at the book, opened it, and hurriedly found a page. He read it with a tight smile.

The formula was there.

He went to the phone and dialed a number.

"Phyllis? This is Steve. . . . I know; I couldn't phone before. Sorry. . . . Tonight? I'm tied up. . . . I told you—"

There was clicking silence.

"I'm sorry, darling. I can't. Jean will be back any minute. Tomorrow night, eh? I . . . I may have a surprise for you."

Evidently the answer was satisfactory, for Haggard whistled as he hung up and went into the kitchen. He returned with a good-sized mixing bowl.

This he placed in the center of the carpet. Then he uncapped the thermos and carefully poured its sluggish contents into the bowl. A thin steam arose. The blood had maintained its heat. Fresh blood, of course, was necessary, though the Jersey farmer had asked annoying questions when Haggard paid him. "But don't you want the pig, mister? Jest the blood? What—"

Why did freshly spilled blood play such an important part in these ceremonies, since mythology's beginning, Haggard wondered. He turned to the book and began reading. Latin phrases rattled crisply from his lips. He was conscious of a slight nervous tension, and purposefully made himself relax. No emotions. No neuroses. No hysteria. Just—logic.

Logic against demons.

The level of the blood was being lowered. A rim of it showed now around the inside of the basin. Where was it going? Oddly enough, Haggard wasn't surprised, though all along he had felt himself to be skeptical of this fantastic business.

The bowl was empty of blood. And the incantation was finished.

Haggard blinked. The lights—had they flickered? It wasn't imagination. They were dimming—

"Rot," he said very softly. "Imagination, glamour, autosuggestion. Electricity depends on current; ghosts can't affect a dynamo."

The lights were bright again. But again they faded. Haggard stood in a pallid darkness, looking down at the vague shadow of the bowl at his feet. It seemed to move—

It pulsed and did not hold its shape. It grew larger. It was a blot of black shadow, a sloping funnel at the bottom of which Haggard saw something green. It was like looking into the wrong end of a telescope. Quite tiny and far away, yet vividly distinct, a room with green walls and floor became visible below. It was empty.

The funnel grew larger. Haggard felt the floor unsteady beneath the soles of his shoes. Vertigo gripped him as he swayed.

If he fell—

"I am," he said quietly, "looking down into a green room. There may be a hole in the carpet and in the floor. Mr. Touhey downstairs may have redecorated. All this is scarcely prob-

able. Therefore what I see isn't real. It's an illusion."

But it was shockingly real. Haggard had difficulty in maintaining his balance. He didn't close his eyes to shut out the sight, though. Instead, he went on: "In this floor is wood and steel, perhaps concrete. They are solids. They cannot be made to vanish except by physical means. Therefore what I see is an illusion."

THE VERTIGO was gone now. Haggard looked down without alarm. He looked suddenly into a face that was all teeth and bristling hair. Clawed talons reached up at him. Saliva slavered from the gaping mouth.

Haggard didn't move. The talons hesitated an inch from his face. They twitched menacingly.

"You see," said the man, "I'm not at all frightened. Come—" He stopped short. He had almost said, "Come up," and that would mean the oral admission of the illusion.

"Come where we can talk comfortably."

The gaping hollow in the floor and the green room at its bottom were gone. The apartment was quite normal again. The bowl stood empty on the carpet. A short, squat man stood before Haggard, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other.

His naked body was hairy and muscular, and his brutal face seemed normal enough, save for a curiously lateral compression of the skull. Forehead and chin slanted back. The lips were compressed tightly over buck teeth.

"Well, sit down," Haggard said, and set the example.

Sullenly the other obeyed, glowering under black brows. There was a silence.

"Are you dumb?" Haggard asked finally, with blatant disrespect. Almost he regretted the question, for when the demon spoke, his teeth were visible. They were the sharp, terrible fangs of a carnivore.

"Are you not afraid of me?" The voice was deep and resonant, and Haggard thought that in the past many men had trembled before it. He chuckled.

"No use to waste time. I'm not afraid, no. What's your name, first of all?"

The demon didn't quite know how to take this. He started to get mad, but thought it over instead. At last he grunted, "You couldn't pronounce it. Call me 'Baal.' Among the Assyrians that meant 'Lord.'"

"Good as any. All right. Have you ever met a man before who wasn't afraid of you?"

Baal's eyes were veiled, and they were amber cat's-eyes. "Why should I answer that?"

Haggard realized that he was getting tense again, and relaxed. "You needn't, then. First I want you to realize that you're not dealing with a stupid lout you can frighten with a roar. I want something from you. I'm willing to pay for it." Haggard waited for the demon's reaction.

He almost grinned at sight of the triumph on Baal's brutal face. "A bargain—a pact! Well, I have done that before, mortal. I have powers; they can serve you, at a price."

"What price? My . . . my soul?" Haggard knew himself to be ridiculous as he asked.

"Your what?" Baal inquired. "Oh, I remember. Mortals always wanted to buy my gifts with what they called 'souls.' I remember what I told the Prophet Alikaam: 'Gift horses may not be sound in gait and limb. Show me

this valuable soul of yours and we'll bargain.' Naturally he couldn't show it to me, though he said it was inside his body." The demon laughed hoarsely. "You can't catch me with an old trick like that. I don't want this precious soul of yours. I want you!"

"Why?"

"To eat," Baal explained. "Human flesh is . . . well, it has an indescribable taste. To a being like me, your meat would provide hours of ecstasy."

Haggard nodded. "Very material—but I get the point. If I agree, what powers have you to give?"

The demon's eyes evaded the man's. "Oh—money. Enough for you to live on in comfort, perhaps. Don't overestimate me—"

"And don't underestimate me. Evolution gave you the specialization of power. I want money, yes, but a great deal of it."

Baal frowned. "Well—I can arrange that. But you must understand that while I have power, it's limited. I can bestow on you only two gifts. The law of compensation makes more impossible. I don't know why, but that's the way it works."

Haggard scrutinized his guest. The statement was apparently true, he decided.

"If I receive a gift from you, how do I know something unpleasant won't come of it? If I ask for a pudding, I don't want it on the end of my nose."

The demon shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "It doesn't work that way. I don't understand it, but you won't have any trouble. The gifts will come naturally. My intervention won't be suspected."

Haggard glanced at his wrist watch and took a deep breath. "All right. I want one million dollars."

"Done."

"Second, I want my wife eliminated without scandal to myself—but I want her to suffer."

"Done."

"Then what?"

"Then I eat you."

Haggard stood up. "Sorry. It doesn't appeal to me. The deal's off."

Baal's jaw dropped. He put out a long-nailed hand.

"Now wait. I didn't mean I'd eat you immediately. Some little time, of course, for you to enjoy yourself—"

Inwardly Haggard exulted. But he did not show it. Psychology was working. "The question arises," he said gently, "why you didn't eat me when you first appeared. For some reason this was impossible. Don't interrupt me! I'm trying to remember—"

"We'll come to some arrangement," Baal said hastily.

"—just what happened. You wanted to eat me. You wanted to get me into a position where that would be possible to you. You . . . of course! You tried to get me to fall into that imaginary pit. That green room. Sure!" Haggard went on, hurriedly making up a convincing lie. "That's just what de Galois wrote—that you couldn't eat a human unless he first entered your green room."

"He wrote that about me?"

"Yes."

"How did you know he referred to me?" the demon asked, with unexpected shrewdness. "Baal isn't my real name."

"He described you," Haggard said blandly. "So I'm not in any danger unless I enter your green room."

"If you make a pact, you must keep it," Baal rapped out. "Besides, you

couldn't hope to escape the might of my powers."

But Haggard knew how to press a bargain. "I want more concessions. I weigh over two hundred pounds on the hoof, so I should be a tasty morsel."

"What do you want?"

"Well—a fair chance."

"Doors," said Baal, after a pause. "A jinni I knew once . . . well, how do you like this? I'll put three doors in your path. Doors each of a different color. The first one will be blue, and beyond it is one wish. When you pass the second door, which will be yellow, your second wish will come true. And beyond the third door—"

"Yes?"

"I shall be waiting to eat you."

"What color—"

But Baal grinned. "I am not stupid. If you knew that, you'd never go through a door of that color. It's neither blue nor yellow."

Haggard said suddenly, "It's a deal."

"Not quite," the demon disagreed. "After you have passed the first two doors, I shall put my seal on you." He smiled. "Don't touch your head; I don't mean horns. It's like a witch mark. That's one of the rules, too, though I don't know why."

"What sort of seal?"

"I'll take some power away from you—some minor physical power, perhaps—but it won't cause you trouble or pain or even embarrassment. Maybe I'll give you a wart on your back. Or put a gray streak in your hair. I just can't help it," he shrugged as Haggard started to protest. "That's one thing I can't alter. My powers won't work unless I meet certain requirements."

Haggard pulled at his lower lip. "I suppose it's no use asking who issues those requirements?"

"How should I know? Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal."

The two shook hands. Baal looked around thoughtfully. "Well, I'll be leaving." His gaze lingered on the Venetial blinds.

Haggard said, "Can you visit me again? You can? Then why not do so? I'd like to talk to you—after all, I don't see a demon every day."

Baal said doubtfully, "I don't—"

"You don't drink whiskey, I'm sure, but I'll have fresh blood for you every time."

"Fine," the demon agreed, baring his fangs—and vanished.

HAGGARD STOOD perfectly motionless for three minutes. Then he held out his hand and looked at it. Quite steady.

He took the bowl to the kitchen and carefully cleansed it of blood. He locked the book of magic in his desk. Finally, he poured a drink.

No need to be on guard just now. Psychology had triumphed over mere demoniac power. Two doors to triumph.

Three doors to doom.

The first door—blue. The second—yellow. Beyond them, Haggard's wishes. But the color of the third door?

The third primary color, red? Scarcely. That would be too obvious, even to a person of Baal's apparent mentality. Haggard did not make the mistake of underrating the demon. Baal was cunning. Green, then—the color of the creature's lair? That, too, was undesirably obvious.

Perhaps the color might be duplicated. The third door might be also blue or yellow. Well, there was time enough to think of that, and already Haggard's brain had worked out a soundly logical method of discovering the truth. First, though, he'd have to

make friends with Baal. Provide him with blood and interest him in modern life. Disarm him—

The room was stuffy. Haggard threw open the windows, but the air itself was sultry with early summer. Below, the park was a blotch of shadow beyond the bright ribbon of the street. Jean and Russ Stone would not be in till late. There was time for a walk.

He took the elevator down, nodding to the sleepy Negro who operated the car, and stepped out into the night. At the Seventy-second Street entrance he turned into Central Park, grateful for the relief of a cool breeze. Idly he wandered, his thoughts busy with plans. Thus Haggard did not notice the shadowy figure beside him till a low voice commanded, "Put up your hands, bud. Quick!"

Instinct rather than logic made Haggard act. He whirled toward the shadow, lifting his hands in a gesture that was never finished. Something crashed against his skull, and the lights went out.

He woke up in a hospital bed. He said, "What's happened?" and the nurse fled to return with a doctor. The latter tested pulse and temperature, and, after a while, talked to Haggard, explaining much.

"Amnesia?" the patient asked. "How long have I been here?"

"About a month. It wasn't amnesia. Concussion. Your wife's here."

When Jean came in, Haggard caught the tail end of a whispered command from the doctor. He peered intently at his wife as she sat down composedly by the bedside.

"Yes. I'm fine—came out of it as suddenly as I went into it. Jean, the doctor ordered you not to tell me something. What?"

"N-nothing."

"I'll only worry until I know." Haggard, through years of living with a woman he detested, had become familiar with her temperament. He used psychology on her now, and at last Jean capitulated.

"The firm—your advertising agency. It burned down the day after you were hurt."

"It's insured." Only after thinking of that did Haggard ask, "Was anyone hurt?"

"No. But—" She hesitated.

"Well?"

"The insurance—lapsed. I don't know anything about it. Russ Stone investigated; he did everything he could. You're bankrupt."

Haggard's smile was like ice. "I'm bankrupt. Not the plural. Love, honor and cherish. For better or worse. Well, I'm glad you told me, Jean. You'd better go now."

WHEN the doctor appeared, there was an argument. Haggard at last had his way. Physically he had been well for a long time, and he was completely cured. He was released from the hospital, with injunctions to be careful.

Careful? What had gone wrong? Baal's powers were untrustworthy. Or—or had the whole thing been due to imagination? No; Haggard knew he was not the type to experience hallucinations. Well—he was bankrupt.

He taxied to look at the razed place where his advertising firm had once stood. Struck by a thought, he entered a drugstore and telephoned his brokers.

"Mr. Strang, please. . . . This is Mr. Gardner. . . . Yes." Haggard had used a false name from the beginning of his dabblings in the stock market. Jean had a way of finding out too much—and Phyllis needed a good deal

of money. Briefly, Haggard wondered about Phyllis, what she had thought when he failed to appear on the night following the accident. He'd phone her next. Strang was speaking.

"Gardner! For God's sake! Where've you been? I've tried every way I knew to get in touch with you—"

"What's wrong?"

"Can you come up here immediately?"

Haggard frowned. The brokers had never seen his face; he'd always used the mails. But this— "All right," he agreed. "I'll be right up."

He found the building, entered an elevator, got off at the twenty-second floor, and walked along a marble corridor. He opened a door and walked into a reception room. The office clerk said, "Can I help you, sir?"

Haggard didn't answer. He was staring at something behind the clerk.

It was a blue door.

The office was furnished in blue-and-tan leather. It was perfectly logical for the door to be of that hue. *Beyond it—*

Beyond it, Haggard sat down facing a gray-haired, plump man—Strang.

"What have you to tell me?" Strangely, he was all ice now.

"Do you remember that consolidated stock—the oil field—you bought a month ago?"

"Yes."

"The bottom dropped out of it the day after, and I tried to phone you. I was told the building had burned down. No one knew of a man named Gardner who had been there."

"The bottom dropped out?"

"For a week. Then the drillers struck a lake of oil. In your absence I acted for you, Mr. Gardner. I had advance information. The stock you now hold is worth, roughly, one million dollars."

There was more talk, but it meant little to Haggard. He was thinking of the blue door through which he had passed to attain his first desire.

Two doors were left—

For the time, Haggard kept his good fortune secret. He lived quietly on in the apartment with Jean, waiting for further developments. Occasionally he saw Phyllis, though now he detected flaws in the girl that had not been apparent before. His passion for her was dying. But his hatred for Jean flamed afresh. He was too much like his wife, and egotists cannot live together.

But Haggard rented another apartment surreptitiously, with a definite purpose in mind. He furnished it carefully and one night poured blood into a bowl that stood on the carpet. Baal came.

Somehow, conversing with the demon was not unpleasant. It made Haggard realize the superiority of his own brain. Baal was like a child—no, a savage, interested in everything. He tried smoking, and tasted liquor, but liked neither. Games delighted him, though. Yet there are few games limited to two persons. It was some time before Haggard could plausibly propose the scheme he had in mind.

This was a word-association test. Baal liked it at first, but soon grew bored before Haggard had had time to lull the demon's possible suspicions. He vanished sleepily, and Haggard cursed. He had to learn the color of the third door.

Well—it was late, yet he wasn't sleepy. During the past few weeks he had spent less and less time at the original apartment, usually staying at his new place overnight. But somehow the place did not attract him now. A walk—

Carefully he avoided the park. He

turned into a bar for a drink, and there met several friends. Influential men, who might have avoided a bankrupt had they been sober. They lived out of town and, when the bar closed at two a. m., cursed in bitter chorus.

"Hell of a time—we're just starting—"

Haggard remembered that his own apartment was but a few blocks away. He suggested it to the others. "I've got plenty of Scotch there."

So they all went to the apartment overlooking Central Park. A strong smell of paint greeted them. The elevator boy said sleepily, "They're redecorating, Mistah Haggard. Ain't seen you for a while, suh?"

Haggard didn't answer. A queer, inexplicable, tight feeling was in his stomach as the elevator shot up. He glanced at his three companions. They seemed to notice nothing amiss.

They got out in the hall. Odor of turpentine and paint was strong. The color scheme, Haggard decided, was atrocious. He paused before his door. It had been repainted.

It had been repainted yellow.

Very quietly Haggard took out his key, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. He walked into the room, his companions behind him. He switched on the light.

Russ Stone stood blinking confusedly. Jean, in a blue negligee, cried out and made a futile gesture.

"Gentlemen," Haggard said quietly. "You're witnesses to this. Adultery is legal cause for divorce. I'll need your evidence later—"

IT WAS as simple as that. Haggard had wanted his wife eliminated without scandal to himself, but he had wanted her to suffer. And certainly Jean's ego would suffer horribly under the publicity that would ensue. Finally, Haggard would be free, in possession of a million dollars. He could have Phyllis without complications, if he still wanted her—a point on which he was doubtful. He faced only the future, in which the third door lay.

Phyllis was pleased when he told her. "Come over tomorrow night and we'll have a party," she smiled. "I'm moving—getting a better place. Here's the address. And thanks for that last check, Stevie."

"It's a date. Tomorrow night."

Yet Haggard knew he had no time to lose. He had an appointment to keep, and kept it, the next night, in the apartment he had rented surreptitiously. Baal came in response to the blood sacrifice. He was in good humor.

"I never discuss business," he grinned, baring the menacing fangs. "Play that record I like—the 'Bolero.'"

Haggard found the black disk. "You said after I passed the first two doors you'd put your seal on me. What—"

Baal wouldn't answer; he was experimenting with a magnetic toy that had always fascinated him. Haggard's eyes narrowed. He'd have to wait.

Two hours later he proposed the word-association test and Baal agreed, not realizing its significance. Haggard had prepared a convincing set of pseudo-rules for the "game." He sat with a watch in his hand, eying it intently.

"Music."

"'Bolero.'"

Two seconds elapsed between key word and response.

"Smoke."

"Fire."

Two and a half seconds.

"Cigarette."

"Water."

Baal, Haggard remembered, had yelled for a glass of water after trying a cigarette. The time was two seconds on this.

"Toy."

"Fast."

Logical response, Haggard thought, after a glance at the magnetic gadget. It worked that way. He went on carefully with a string of meaningless words, lulling Baal's suspicions and establishing the normal time of response. Only twice did the demon hesitate for any noticeable period.

"Food."

A very long pause—ten seconds. Then: "Eat." Baal had discarded the natural association word and substituted a harmless one—one that would reveal nothing. Had he first thought of Haggard or—the color of the third door?

"Open."

"Book." But five seconds had elapsed. Not quite long enough for Baal to think of a completely harmless word, but long enough to substitute a second for the first. Haggard remembered that, and presently said:

"Book."

The seconds ticked past. Baal was silent. At last he said, "Dead."

Haggard continued, but his mind was working furiously. The logical response to "book" would be, probably "read." Yet Baal's subconscious had warned him against that word. Why?

There were, of course, two ways of pronouncing it—in the present and in the past tense.

"Necktie," Haggard threw in suddenly. He caught Baal's startled glance at his own throat, and the demon's pause.

"Choke."

Haggard was wearing a red necktie. Inwardly exulting, he threw in a few more key words to clinch the question, and finally stopped, realizing that now he knew the color of the third door. It was red. Beyond it lay doom—but Haggard would never open a red door, or go near one. Baal had lost, though the demon did not even realize it. Demoniac power was no match for applied psychology!

Haggard lost interest in the proceedings, though he disguised his feelings well. But it seemed hours before Baal yawned and vanished, with a casual nod.

THE ROOM was empty. And that was unendurable. With relief, Haggard remembered his appointment with Phyllis. He'd take her out—no, he'd bring her champagne, and they'd celebrate. Phyllis wouldn't know the real reason, of course, but—that didn't matter.

With two bottles of champagne under his arm, Haggard dismounted from a taxi half an hour later. He tipped the cabman lavishly and stood for a second looking up at the purple, star-sprinkled sky. A warm wind blew on his face. A million dollars—and freedom, not to mention revenge on Jean. Haggard touched his forehead with an odd gesture. Beyond that frontal bone lay his brain, stronger than demons or their power.

"Cogito, ergo vici," he paraphrased silently. And turned to the steps of the apartment house.

The elevator boy let him off at the third floor and gestured down the corridor. "She just moved in today, sir. Right there."

Haggard walked along the passage, hearing the low whine of the descending elevator. 3-C. This was it. A door, he noticed, painted a soft gray. He'd be noticing such things from now

on. Watching for a red one that he must never pass.

He took out the key Phyllis had given him and inserted it in the lock. Then he turned the knob and opened the door.

He looked into a bare room whose walls and ceiling and floor were green. Baal, naked and hairy, stood quietly waiting. Haggard didn't move, yet an invisible wind bore him forward. Behind him the door crashed shut.

Baal smiled, showing his teeth. "Our bargain," he said. "Now I shall exact the fee."

Haggard had turned into ice. He heard himself whisper, "You didn't keep the bargain. It was a red door—"

Baal said, "How did you learn that? I didn't tell you. Yes, it was a red door, the third one."

Haggard turned around and walked a few steps. He put his finger on the gray, smooth surface of the door, incongruous in contrast with the green walls about it. "It's not red."

Baal was walking forward, too. "Have you forgotten the witch mark? After you passed the second door, I took a minor physical power away from you—"

He drew the back of his hairy hand across his mouth. Haggard heard the faint click of teeth and whispered, "Applied psychology—"

"I know nothing of that," said Baal. "I have only my powers. It was part of our bargain that I deprive you of a minor physical power. The door is not gray. It is red. You are color-blind—"

THE END.

TWO FOR A BARGAIN

by DOROTHY QUICK

● Elsbeth had reason to hate the world—and she wanted to hurt that tight, hard New England colonial town. So, naturally, she wanted to be a witch, tried hard to be—

Illustrated by M. Isip

I LOOKED at the patchwork quilt. It turned the old-fashioned four-poster bed into a thing of glory fit for a king. The varicolored materials shimmered in the light from my bedside lamp, and the strange runelike embroidery that held the patches together glowed like sunlight on moving waters. It didn't seem that anything so beautiful could be sinister.

Yet Aunt Amabel had told me odd tales of it; that a witch had made it, and that each patch had power to take you back into time to relive the story of

whoever had been associated with that particular piece of material.

I was still skeptical, although I had fallen asleep one night with my hand on a piece of blue and silver brocade, and been catapulted through space into a weird and terrible part of French history. Later I went back even further to Babylon and weird events in which I had lived a past life of my own, proving to myself, at least, that there was such a thing as reincarnation.

I regarded the quilt; it was innocent-looking enough, and yet the embroidery seemed to be trying to spell out something, and when I touched the golden threads, it was like touching a living thing.

According to Aunt Amabel, a man had slept with his hand on one of the patches and the next morning he had been mad. According to her maid, Hester, a woman had slept with her hand one one of the patches, and the next morning she was dead!

Neither Aunt Amabel nor Hester knew which patch brought madness, which destruction, but they begged me to take no chances—not to use the quilt again.

But I had to. I didn't believe there was a patch that could hold an experience that would bring me either madness or death, but there was one strange, triangular piece of parchmentlike material that looked like human skin. I had to know what it was—what story it held—and my curiosity was stronger than my fear. Besides I wanted, more than anything in the world, to see if I could meet again in an adventure the man to whom, in my last vision, I had pledged myself for all time.

I climbed into the high bed, sank deep under the covers, pulling them tight about my neck, for the Scotch air sweeping in from the moors was very cold. Then I located the patch I wanted—that hard, leathery patch that looked like human skin—and put my left hand on it. I shivered a little, for it was like touching another hand. Then quickly, before I could change my mind, I turned out the light.

I waited in the dark, my hand on the patch, my mind curiously alert. I wanted to go to sleep to begin the adventure, if there was to be one, but nothing happened. There was only the cold air blowing about my face and the strange sensation that my hand rested on another hand, a feeling that no amount of reasoning could banish from my mind.

Suddenly I realized that I was no longer touching the patch that looked like human skin. Instead my hand was actually touching skin, real skin—another hand! Once more an adventure of the quilt had begun.

I LOOKED DOWN at two hands with thin nervous fingers interlacing themselves. They were the most repulsive hands I had ever seen, cadaverous-looking, with long pointed nails that curved at the ends like a bird's talons.

Heretofore I had gone through horrible happenings, but the bodies in which the spirit of Alice Strand had been imprisoned by the quilt's magic had been attractive. After regarding those revolting hands I knew it couldn't be so this time. I dreaded seeing the rest of the person of whom I was now a part.

It was a woman. I knew that by the white apron and the full black, woolen skirt that fell about scrawny ankles and the bodice of the same material, but I

couldn't see of what age or type. The woman was standing on the edge of a wood. All about her and behind her towered great trees of an impenetrable blackness. Dressed in black as she was, she must have been almost invisible as she stood there practically fused with the landscape. Before her stretched sunny fields; a little distance away there was a stone wall and steps that climbed over it and down its other side.

I had never seen such a sharp contrast of darkness and light—the shining, cultivated lands and the dark somber woods. I wondered if death could be like that—coming out of darkness into light.

Just then the woman began muttering to herself. "He will come . . . he will come." Her voice sounded young. Perhaps it wasn't a woman after all; perhaps it was a girl. The hands—those repulsive hands—gave no indication of age. The skin was firm, not wrinkled. Now my curiosity made me wish for a mirror. If I had a mirror, I could get some idea of the person with whom I was so closely linked. But there was none, nor anything near in which I could see a reflection.

A gay song suddenly filled the silence. A man's voice, rich and mellow, singing something about love and springtime announced that someone was coming. The hands stopped their weaving and I felt a wild joy surge through the veins that were temporarily mine. It seemed odd that I could not read her thoughts, but I knew by previous experience that I could not, except on rare occasions of great emotional stress. Although all feelings of whosoever body I inhabited were mine, it was only as they were being lived that I knew them. I understood the woman—or girl—was full of joy. I assumed it was at the approach of the singer, but I didn't know it actually until she cried, "Johan!"

Now I saw a man climbing the far side of the steps. His head appeared first, then his body, bit by bit, until finally he stood on the top of the fence and waved his arm. "Elsbeth, are you there?"

"Yes, Johan, yes . . . here on the edge of the woods." Eager the voice, eager the heart that was beating furiously inside her bosom.

Johan hurried down the steps and across the field. He was strikingly handsome in a blond, Norwegian way. Light-blond hair helmeted his head and hung about his shoulders; even at a distance his eyes were zircon-blue. In ancient Greece he would no doubt have been a hero of the Olympic games—he had the perfect build and muscular equipment for one. His mouth was firm and kind, his nose straight. He was dressed in brown homespun with wide collars and cuffs of white. His legs were incased in knitted stockings, his shoes had silver buckles, and the hat which he carried in his hand was broad-brimmed with a silver buckle in front.

The entire costume was strangely familiar. I had seen it before—often—in the papers and on cards celebrating Thanksgiving Day. One of the Pilgrim Fathers actually stood before me in the flesh. I was in America in the days of its beginning.

The man came near.

"Good day, Elsbeth Farquar. I give thee greeting in the name of Our Lord."

"As I do thee, Johan Rider."

"Come out of the dark, for I can hardly see thee, and I have much to tell."

Shrinkingly Elsbeth moved toward him, holding her hands under her apron.

It was evident that she was sensitive about them.

When she had come a little way he flung himself down on the grass and motioned her to sit near.

"Elsbeth, do you remember what I spoke of last?"

Elsbeth's heart beat even faster, as the wings of a moth flutter and accelerate themselves against the light.

"I do remember."

Johan waited for her to sit beside him and put his hand upon her shoulder.

"Well, rejoice with me. The Elders have agreed that I am come to marriageable age and have given their consent to my taking a wife."

"Oh, Johan . . . Johan!" Elsbeth's voice quivered with emotion.

"I knew you would rejoice for me, Elsbeth, but truly I did not guess that you would be so affected." Johan's tones were clear and undisturbed as a woodland pool. "Now you must wish me Godspeed for my journey to Boston town."

"To Boston town?" she exclaimed. "Why do you go there?"

"What for but to ask the hand of Priscilla Damen and bring her back to Anesfield as my wife."

If each word had been a knife thrust into Elsbeth's heart, the effect would not have been more devastating.

"Your wife?" she muttered. "But I cannot hear you aright. You do but jest to plague me."

Johan was surprised. "Why should I, Elsbeth? I wanted you to be the first to know the realization of my dreams as you were the first to hear the dreams themselves."

Almost as though she were speaking in a trance Elsbeth cried, "But I thought . . . I thought you told me those dreams because I had a part in them . . . that it was I—" she broke off abruptly.

Johan began to laugh. "You thought that I loved you? That I would marry you? Oh, surely not. Have you never looked in your mirror?" he laughed, and laughed. "Now you jest with me, Elsbeth, and it is a goodly joke."

"It *is* a jest, but not the one you think, Johan. This joke is on no one but Elsbeth Farquar . . . that, because you were kind to me and did not mock my ugliness as the others did I thought you loved me, is a jest," she laughed—but her laughter was high-pitched and bordered close to madness. "I was a fool, and yet . . . and yet . . . you were so kind to me—" Her voice broke and she buried her face in her hands.

Johan stopped laughing.

"Truly, Elsbeth, I meant no harm. You were my friend . . . nor did I guess you would think differently. I told you all my thoughts, but it never occurred to me that you would take it personally when I spoke of love . . . nor did I ever guess that you would think of love at all. You always seemed to understand that you—" He broke off, not wanting to hurt her further.

Elsbeth removed her hands from her face. Slowly, deliberately, she spoke.

"You thought because I was so ugly I would not dream of love. Well, I would not have, but that day when the Raynall child was mocking me and you slapped him for a naughty boy and said that beauty came from within, not from without; I thought that you had penetrated the shell of this hateful body and seen my soul all beautiful and shining in its love for you. It seemed too good to be true, but then you sought me out and talked to me, and I believed that you were different from the rest. I

worshiped you, and each time that I met you I loved you more. When you reproved people who made fun of me, I could have wiped your feet with my hair. And now you tell me all of this was friendship . . . pity . . . not love . . . and that I should have known it couldn't be love by looking in my mirror!"

"Truly, I am sorry, Elsbeth."

"Truly, you should be. And you will be sorrier still—you and your fancy bride from Boston town." She reared her head back as though she had been a snake ready to strike. "Go now, Johan Rider, and never speak to me again until you come to beg my mercy!"

"Please, Elsbeth, you are overwrought."

Both Johan and Elsbeth continued to use the "thees" and "thous" of their time, but in my own mind I substituted the more familiar pronouns.

Johan got up and held out his hand.

"I would remain your friend, Elsbeth."

She shook her head.

"Between us there can be no friendship. I loved you with all my heart, with all my soul, but I do not love you now. Instead I hate . . . yes, hate . . . you, Johan, for using me as a buffer against your loneliness and longing for another maid. You pitied me . . . yes . . . and you were kind to me, but that was because you needed someone to talk to of love . . . which is a forbidden topic in Salem unless the Elders give consent. Well, I risked the stocks to hear your dreams. I was a fool . . . an ugly fool. But not now. Go and beware of me, Johan, for they say a woman scorned is much to reckon with. I will have my revenge on you as well as those others who see only ugliness. I will show you all what true ugliness is!"

Johan reasoned with her a little while but she was adamant. He pleaded but she remained unchanged. Finally he left reluctantly, quite bewildered by the havoc he had wrought. Her threats he took lightly enough—that was plainly written in his face—but that he was genuinely sorry for all that had happened was equally plain.

Elsbeth watched his retreat. When he reached the top of the stile he turned and waved. Elsbeth got up from the grass where she was still sitting and, turning her back on him, walked steadfastly toward the woods. When she reached their leafy shelter she fled behind a great elm. Only then, when she was safe from observation, did she look back.

The green fields stretched their pleasant acres over the landscape but there was no sign of any living person in their verdant domain. Johan Rider had gone.

Elsbeth began to run deep into the woods. As she went dry sobs racked her body and her nails cut into the palms of her hands. She ran until she reached a clearing where a little pool caught sparks of sunlight and transmitted them into a liquid gold. She sank down on the moss beside it and leaning on her elbows propped up her face with both hands and looked steadfastly into the crystal waters.

She had found her mirror and for the first time I saw her face. Never in all my life, and the lives I had lived vicariously through the quilt, had I seen such ugliness.

The mouth was large like a clown's, with a funny upward quirk in the corners. The nose would have made

Cyrano de Bergerac's inconspicuous. It was long, thin and narrow, humped in the middle, widened at the end with a straight upward slant and enlarged nostrils. Her chin was pointed, her cheekbones high. The skin itself was mottled and puffy. She had great masses of wiry black hair thrust under a white linen cap from which it escaped coarse and thick. Only her eyes were beautiful—great tortured wells of chestnut brown—but they were half-hidden under beetling brows and lashes of the same thick, wiry hair.

For the first time I understood Johan. It seemed incredible that such a creature could have, for an instant, supposed any man could think of her and love. I had resented Johan's behavior but I did so no longer. Of course he would have felt free to talk to her of his dreams and love, secure in the knowledge that she was set apart from such things, while she— Oh, it was pathetic. Poor Elsbeth!

And she was young—young with a body that Diana, the moon goddess, might have envied. Surely the gods must have been jesting when they took a perfect torso and gave it a head, hands and feet that were caricatures and did not match. What a terrible burden for a girl to bear, especially in the days when there were no beauty parlors. Still looking at the reflection in the pool I had to admit that here was a countenance not even modern methods could improve.

Elsbeth was realizing it, too. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"No hope . . . there is no hope. Why was I cursed like this . . . why? Have I not prayed . . . prayed— There is no use in prayers. The Lord has deserted me, plagued me, cheated me. There is no hope for me in prayers . . . unless—" She looked at her hands, and a clear image stamped itself on her mind—a little dog-eared brown book. "I found it in my father's chest after he had died," she whispered, "'The Witch's Litany' . . . only once I looked in it and then thrust it away for fear of sacrilege, but it said that Satan could grant all things. That much I saw before I buried it deep. My father was a scholar . . . he knew hidden lore. Perhaps the book is right. I will study it . . . I will become a witch. Yes, here and now I will pray to Satan."

She paused, aghast at her own words. But then a firm determination took possession of her. She bathed her face, that loathsome countenance, with water from the pool. Then she knelt and raised her hands in supplication.

"O Satan, lord of the underworld, I pray to thee and beg that thou wilt take me into your fold, give me of your bounty and wisdom so that I may vanquish my enemies . . . yes, that I may bring Johan Rider groveling to his knees before me and make a thing worse than nothing of that Priscilla whom he loves. Let me have my revenge on them and all those who have mocked me. In return I renounce forever my former ways and consecrate myself to thee, Lord Satan, forever and ever. Amen."

At first her voice had been low and hesitating, but at the end it was strong and defiant, unashamed of its own blasphemy.

Nothing happened—nothing. The sun still poured down on the pool and Elsbeth remained unchanged. She waited, obviously expecting a thunderbolt, or at least the appearance of Lucifer himself, but nothing happened. She bent her head to the ground, cried aloud,

"Satan, Satan, I call to thee. Take my soul and in return make me a witch and grant my desire so that I can ever serve you," over and over.

Then she waited.

Still nothing happened.

At last, wearily, she got to her feet.

"Perhaps it may be he has heard . . . or perhaps I did it wrong. I will go home and consult the book, for I must be a witch . . . nay, I *am* a witch." She held her head back proudly, then she walked slowly out of the woods.

As Elsbeth approached the village she met one of the Elders who smiled a greeting at her. She inclined her head. Politeness to the Elders was a law and she had no wish to sit in the stocks in the boiling sun. To her surprise the Elder, Cyrus Finchley, stopped her.

"Good evening, sister, you have been to the woods again."

"Yes, Father Finchley."

"The Elders have spoken of you in the council. We feel that it is scarcely safe for you to venture so far. In fact had you been other than yourself it would be forbidden."

"True, father, my face is its own protection." As she said the words Elsbeth gasped. A few hours ago she would have died rather than admit her ugliness. Now she was glorying in it. Satan must have heard and answered her prayer.

Cyrus Finchley was surprised. "I said not so, daughter. The town is grateful to you for your skill with herbs and so would not keep you from the places where they may be found. Your tea saved the life of the sister of the governor, so we are beholden to you. Because of this we have appointed a protector for you, and when you go to find your remedies old Fithian Grey will see that you are safe."

"I truly thank you all but I need no watching. The Indians are friendly. There is nothing else to fear."

"Still we would prefer Fithian and his rifle guarded you."

"Then it shall be so." After all, Fithian was old and senile. If there was anything she wanted to do that he shouldn't see, she could easily manage old Fithian.

"One more thing, daughter. It had slipped our minds until Schuyler van Warden remembered . . . your father, a very learned man, had many books. Now some of them may not be fitted for a maid. The council would examine these books. Such as we deem fit will be returned to you . . . the others we will keep or burn."

Now Elsbeth *knew* Satan had heard her prayer. He had sent her this warning so she would not lose the book that was to be the key to her becoming a witch. She smiled secretly.

"There is a box I have not opened. I do not care for reading. I do not do it well enough." These were the first lies she had ever told and they slipped through her lips as easily as though she were Ananias himself.

"Good, daughter. I will come tomorrow with my serving man and we will open the chest, and whatever doubtful books there are I will take to the council. Good day, Elsbeth Farquar."

"Good day, Cyrus Finchley." Elsbeth dropped a little curtsey and hurried on.

Surely, surely Satan must have heard her prayer to have sent her this warning. Halfway down the street she had further confirmation. A group of children were plaguing a poor, scrawny little black kitten. Just as Elsbeth

came even with them the kitten broke away from its tormentors and, making a wild lunge for freedom, leaped into Elsbeth's arms, the nearest refuge from the children who pursued it.

"Give us back the kitten," cried the eldest of the boys.

"Nay," Elsbeth cuddled the poor, frightened animal, "you shall not torture so poor a thing."

"The widow Aylesford threw it out. She said a black cat was only fit for witches. We could do with it as we would."

A fire of exultation leaped up within Elsbeth. She had heard whispered tales of witches and their familiars. The devil had sent her a familiar; that meant she was practically a witch. She would guard the kitten with her life if need be for it was like her new life. She addressed the children fiercely.

"Everything that breathes has a right to live. This kitten has done no harm. I will care for it. Go home to your mothers and beg forgiveness for your cruelty. See"—she held up the kitten's paw which was raw and bleeding—"what mischief you have wrought."

One by one they slunk away. As they went the oldest boy gained courage. "Witch cat, witch cat!" he called back. The boy, Thomas, expected Elsbeth to drop the kitten at these dire words and was amazed to see that instead she held the little black thing closely and smiled joyously as though she had unexpectedly found a treasure.

THE FIRST THING Elsbeth did when she reached her tiny shingled house was to attend to the kitten. She bathed its injured paw and bound it up with a bit of white linen. Then she gave it a dish of milk, which the little thing lapped up greedily. When it had finished, it came over to Elsbeth, walking gingerly on its bandaged foot, leaped

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into her lap and licked her hand as though it had been a dog instead of a member of the feline race. Then, just as deliberately as it had come, it went back to the cushion she had put near the dish of milk where it curled up and promptly purred itself to sleep.

Elsbeth sat looking at the hand the kitten's tongue had kissed as though it had been suddenly metamorphosed into a thing of beauty.

"It has accepted me. The emissary of Satan has put his seal of approval on me." Surely enough there was a red mark where the cat's tongue had touched.

A feeling of exultation surged through her. In that instant she changed. She had in the course of a few hours gone through a gamut of emotions—from a girl in love to a woman filled with hate. From a shy, retiring maiden, who lived a simple life, wanted to help everyone, and who believed in good, she had turned into a bitter, caustic person who believed in evil and wanted to have revenge—not only on Johan, but everyone else.

A wave of energy swept through her, coupled with a grim determination. She could hardly wait to be a witch. She must find the book. She slipped the bolt on her door and lit another candle. Taking the second candle she carefully shielded it with her hand and ascended the stairs to the attic.

Once there she put the candle on the floor and made a sort of cover for it out of an old pillow so that it would not betray the fact to a passerby that she was in the attic. Then she found her father's chest, pulled it out and went feverishly through its contents. Most of the books were scholarly tomes which interested her not at all. Finally at the very bottom she found the book she sought. Bound in queer, parchment-like material, the title page said, "The Witch's Book."

Elsbeth wanted to begin reading it there but she didn't want anyone to suspect she had been in the chest and, too, she was a little bit afraid of the light being seen. After she had tumbled the books back as nearly as she could in the way they had been, she locked the chest. As a final touch, Elsbeth took a large spider web that was in one corner and draped it over the lock. The spider itself was in the center of the web and as she moved it over it crawled across her hand. Ordinarily the mere contact with a spider would have sent the cold shivers up and down her spine, but now she looked at it quite coldly.

"It is my friend," she said.

THE REST of the night she spent in a closet reading the book. According to the book Elsbeth should appear in a covin as a postulant and be initiated into the gathering of thirteen beings consecrated to Satan. That she couldn't do. There might be covins near Anesfield but she had no way of knowing where they were nor who would conduct them. The probabilities were, she thought, that her master—for already she thought of Satan as her master—would, in his own good time, lead her to one, but in the meantime she was sure she was in his fold. She had in her own way abjured her former faith and sworn herself to Satan and she was sure he had accepted her—for had he not sent the black cat to be her familiar?

The only thing that was left, according to the book, was the baptism. That, she realized, was a very important part of the ritual, but she thought she could even manage that.

When it grew light enough for her to see she extinguished her candle, crept out to where the kitten was and with its wounded paw she traced the sign of the cross upside down upon her forehead. Then she heaved a great sigh of relief. She was now a witch!

That morning when she started to change her dress she began searching for a witch mark and when she found, just below her waist, the tiny wartlike thing which she had never noticed before, she was sure that everything had been done just as it should be.

Now she was ready to try one of the spells that the book set forth. She would try an easy one first, then she could work up to one of the more complex ones whereby she could have revenge upon Johan.

But not now. There wasn't time. Elder Finchley might come almost any time and she must put the house in order.

She hid the book under a loose board in her bedroom and set about doing the chores of the day as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

Soon Elder Finchley came for the books, took away several histories and Latin writings, which he said were not for her eyes. He regarded the black cat with dislike and said she would do well to turn it out. When Elsbeth told him how she had rescued it he said, "How like your kind heart, daughter," and went his way not noticing her sneering smile.

THAT AFTERNOON Elsbeth went out to the woods to gather the ingredients necessary for her spell. While there she gathered mandrake and was especially pleased to find one that looked for all the world like a representation of Beelzebub himself; there were even traces of tiny horns on the brow. Elsbeth took this for an omen and searched diligently for the other things she needed.

She found them all—slips of yew, leaves of bittersweet, a rare herb the book had mentioned and a flower that, fortunately, was in bloom. All these she wrapped in her handkerchief and hurried home because she was in great haste to try her spell.

Johan Rider had that very morning ridden for Boston, so Cyrus Finchley had told her, and the knowledge had been like salt put in an open wound. For vengeance on Johan himself she was not ready yet but she fully intended to work evil on something of his and had selected the cows, patiently standing in his barn, which he had left in charge of his man of all work.

She returned to her house and barred her door. The kitten leaped up on her shoulder and stayed there all the while she pored over "The Witch's Book," its black tail making a shadow on the printed page.

Elsbeth studied the charm carefully and then she began. According to directions she boiled her ingredients, adding a little of her carefully hoarded salt —for salt in those days was a rare commodity, and portioned out in small quantities among the people. As she stirred the mess she spoke the words that the book had put down and when all was finished and the pot had cooled she kneaded the contents into a ball. This she tied around with a long hair from her own head.

Then she chanted:

"As this ball grows withered, small,
Pain and ill will come to all.
On his cows I put this curse—
Good to bad, and bad to worse."

When she had finished she hung the

ball up in her chimney. She knew that the heart from the fire would dry it quickly and she was impatient for her ill-doing to bear fruit.

A FEW DAYS LATER, for the first time in her life, she struck a child, little Patience Maitland, a chubby, golden-haired girl of seven. Heretofore Elsbeth had played with Patience, and often amused the child by the hour when her mother was churning or devoted to some other homely task.

When Patience saw Elsbeth hurrying in her direction she thought that Elsbeth was coming to play with her. She had no idea that Elsbeth was walking past the Rider farm hoping to see or hear something to satisfy her curiosity about the cows. Little Patience ran out and threw both arms about Elsbeth's waist.

"Good day, Mistress Farquar," she said. "I have a new doll to show you that Master Rider gave me before he left for Boston."

If Patience hadn't mentioned Johan and Boston, Elsbeth might have forgotten her hatred, for she had loved the child. But the innocent remark was like spark to tinder.

"Go away. I have no time for dolls," Elsbeth said rudely, and pushed the child from her. She evidently had more strength than she knew for the child cried out with pain. Elsbeth did not stop to comfort her. She walked on.

Patience ran after Elsbeth.

"Mistress Farquar, Mistress Farquar, if I hurt you I beg your pardon. Please, please come back and see my doll."

The poor little thing thought she must have done something wrong. She couldn't comprehend Elsbeth's being other than kind. She clutched at Elsbeth's apron trying to stop her.

Elsbeth raised her hand. "Go away . . . go away."

"Please . . . please—" the child was sobbing hysterically.

Elsbeth lowered her hand, hitting Patience smartly on the cheek.

"Let me be." She wrenched her apron away and went on heedless of the fact that the child was overbalanced by the sudden release of the apron to which she had been holding and had fallen with her foot crumpled under her. The ankle was sprained and she fainted with the pain.

Her mother ran out and, bending over the child, was crying out, "My little lamb!"

The sound of the mother's anguish was pleasant to Elsbeth, but at that moment came another cry—from Johan Rider's stable—the cry of a tortured animal, which was like celestial music in Elsbeth's ears.

She stood there listening, rejoicing in her new found power. She could see a great deal of activity around the stable, people rushing back and forth, and she smiled to herself, "Bad to worse, bad to worse—"

The cries ceased. Elsbeth was even happier. That meant the cow had died. She hoped it was the Jersey that Johan set such store by.

Just then Johan's hired man came out of the stable. Elsbeth walked to him.

"Are you in trouble here?" she asked.

"Nay, Mistress Farquar, we have cause for rejoicing. The Jersey cow has calved. Two bonny heifers—twins! And from his favorite cow. Master Rider *will* rejoice!"

A wave of faintness swept over Elsbeth. Her charm hadn't worked! She

muttered something and turned about, making for her home. She must see the ball in the chimney! She must consult the book again.

As she passed the Maitland house, Patience's brother ran out.

"You are wicked," he cried. "You have hurt my sister."

"It was her own fault. A bad child deserves punishing."

"Nay," a soft, sweet voice interrupted. "My Patience deserves only good. I know you did not mean to hurt her, Elsbeth Farquar. Will you not come in? The little thing cries for you. She loves you so." Mrs. Maitland put out her hand to Elsbeth.

"How she could love that face I know not, but she does," whispered the boy.

Elsbeth heard.

"My face is my own, Thomas Maitland, but as it displeases you I take it elsewhere." She shot a venomous look at them and made off, mumbling curses on the boy as she went. She heard Mrs. Maitland call, but paid no heed.

When she got home the kitten ran to her giving every evidence of being glad to see her. Elsbeth caught it to her breast.

"You and I are one," she said solemnly, and the kitten purred happily.

When the door was bolted Elsbeth looked at the ball in the chimney. It was dried and shriveled to one half its former size. By all rights at least the major portion of Johan's herd should be ailing. Elsbeth got out her book. So far as she could see she had done nothing wrong, except she hadn't gathered the mandrake root under full moon at midnight. Of course—that was it. Well, she would try another spell, and this time make sure she had all the proper ingredients.

She was a witch. She would have the attributes of one. She would go over Johan's house and call down curses on him and his. "Bad to worse" it should be on his cows, his land, his bride, on Johan himself. She would do other spells from the book.

Though the mere idea of some of the ingredients would have ordinarily made her shudder, she now thought quite calmly of procuring them. She slipped out of her house that night with the kitten tucked under her arm. She was afraid to leave it at home for fear it might cry in her absence. Wrapped in a dark cloak she was practically invisible.

In the graveyard she found what she sought, and went relentlessly about procuring the things the book spoke of.

My every sense revolted from what she was doing. I, Alice Strand, hated Elsbeth and the dark she had made her own. I pitied her, too, for I, better than anyone, knew her soul had been warped by Johan, and yet I could not truly blame him. I was afraid, too, of what might come. Would Elsbeth descend into the utter blackness of Satanism and drag me with her? I knew there *was* magic in the world—and witches. I would not be living Elsbeth's life were it not for a witch's magic quilt. Would Elsbeth master the black arts? What would happen to me? Here in this eerie cemetery I was full of fear.

Elsbeth was not afraid. She completed her loathsome tasks with steady fingers and when she left the graveyard the black cat was not all that she carried.

To return she passed through the

woods where she had made her covenant with Satan. She remembered and stopped long enough to kneel and pray to her master. In the same place she also dug some more mandrake root and hen's bane.

As she came back into town, the moon swung low in the skies. As she passed the Maitlands' she noticed there was a light burning in the window. A little farther on she bumped into someone.

"How now, Mistress Farquar—what do you here? Has Mistress Maitland sent for you, too?"

It was Dr. Prouty. Elsbeth caught her breath and forced her mind to work quickly.

"No, my home was so warm I felt I must have air, and so I took a walk. Is Mistress Maitland ill?"

"Sorrow never comes singly. But this afternoon Patience suffered a badly wrenched ankle and now young Tom had fallen down the cellar stairs and broken his arm. I go to set it. Will you not come, Elsbeth, you, who are good at healing?"

"I was not sent for, nor do they need me when you are there. Besides I am very weary." She could go to no house with the grisly burdens under her cloak.

"Go home, then, Mistress Farquar, and roam no more at night. It is not seemly."

"I will obey you."

"Good . . . then of this time I will not speak. Farewell, Elsbeth Farquar."

"Farewell." She ran all the way home, hugging the shadows and not until she was within the house, and the fruit of her night's work safely bestowed did she dare to relax and get her breath.

THE NEXT DAY when one of the children made a face at her and called out something about her ugliness, Elsbeth answered back, "If you think my face is ugly, it is nothing to what yours will be some day!"

The boy was surprised to silence, and hurried off. He had not gone far when Elsbeth heard a cry and saw him lying in the road, his face bleeding from a cut. He had fallen on a sharp, jagged stone, and a flap of skin hung dangling down his face. Elsbeth knew he'd bear a scar from it till his death.

She laughed. "Did I not say my face was nothing to what yours would be?"

The child did not shrink from her; instead he begged her to help him, pointing to the flap of skin.

She pulled it off and thrust it into her pocket thinking it might come in useful for a spell sometime. She leaned over the boy.

"Let this be a lesson to you not to mock me again or else I will curse you further."

The boy, holding his wide cuff against his face, smiled at her through tears.

"I beg your pardon for my mockery. You are so kind to take away that dangling thing. I thank you."

Elsbeth ignored his apologies.

"I will curse you more . . . I will curse you!"

Cyrus Finchley's voice broke in.

"Peace, daughter. I heard the ill thing this boy said of you." He turned to the lad. "Go to the doctor now, and see you mock no more."

"I cursed him and look what happened," Elsbeth cried. "If I should curse again—"

"You are overwrought, daughter. 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord—and truly His wrath was expeditious. You are not a beauty, Elsbeth, but you are kindly and sweet, which counts for more."

Somehow, she'd failed—she was falling, the spell unsuccessful—

"I am neither kind nor sweet and I have been patient far too long!" Anger and bitterness edged her voice.

"In truth you have been tried." Cyrus regarded that grotesque face and the horrible hands pityingly. "So we will forget it, but predict no more, daughter, lest people say you are in league with evil. Will you go to Mistress Finchley? She is ailing and would like one of your healing brews."

ELSBETH WENT to Mistress Finchley. The older woman was ill and fatigue had put great circles around her eyes. She was glad to see Elsbeth and asked immediately, "Will you give me some of that tea you gave me two months ago, Elsbeth? It helped me mightily."

"I will go now and find the herbs," Elsbeth smiled, "and bring it back to you within the hour."

"Good, and then I will tell you of Johan's bride, Priscilla. Johan brought her back this morning. My good man tells me they are wondrous happy and Johan brings her here to see me, as I am not strong enough to go to her." Mistress Finchley lifted a fragile hand. "Is it not wonderful, Elsbeth, that Johan is wed so happily and so well? She brought him a large dower and wagon loads of well stocked chests. But these mean nothing to Johan. He is so in love he can see nothing but her blue eyes. I mean to be very kind to Priscilla Rider and help her. She is young."

An icy sheath formed over Elsbeth's heart, and hate flowed through her as it had that day in the fields when she talked to Johan. Now this hate encompassed Mistress Finchley. She should be made to suffer, too. She would brew her a tea—yes, indeed—but not quite the tea she expected. Mistress Finchley would not be able to help Priscilla, the blue-eyed doll. The words pricked Elsbeth's mind. There was a charm in the book, a charm that might—

She left Mistress Finchley and later brought back a bottle.

"You must drink a little each day," she said. There was no hint in her voice that the mixture was not the benevolent herbal one that Mistress Finchley knew.

Mistress Finchley was full of talk of Johan and his bride.

"She has hair like spun gold, so full of curls it will not stay beneath her cap, and eyes like corn flowers. Her skin is white and her little face is round and fresh as an apple blossom. One cannot wonder that Johan loves her so," she went on and on.

While she was talking a glint of gold on the floor caught Elsbeth's eye. She looked down and there on the hand-woven rug lay a long golden hair!

Truly Satan was looking after her, Elsbeth thought. The one thing she needed for her charm! While Mistress Finchley was raving on, Elsbeth surreptitiously leaned over and picked up the golden hair, tucking it in her long sleeve. This was better luck than she thought to have. It distinctly said in the book that one must have some part of the person themselves to complete the charm—a bit of skin, a paring of nail or a hair from the head. Elsbeth had expected she would have to wait months for one of these things and now here it was ready to her hand with no effort on her part!

ELSBETH GOT AWAY from Mistress Finchley's as quickly as possible. That night she worked long and arduously. First she melted the wax of two candles,

with it she mixed a little human fat—one of the things she had procured in the graveyard. When it was all melted and cooled, she began to mold a little figure. She fashioned it carefully until under her fingers it actually assumed the outlines of a young girl. She even modeled the face as nearly as she could to Mistress Finchley's description. Inside of it she placed the golden hair and a bit of mandrake root, which was said to be powerful in magic of all kinds. Then she closed up the figure, and when it was quite hard, hid it away. It was all ready now except she must find something that Priscilla had worn to dress it in. Then she could really commence action.

The little black kitten came and put its head into her hand and rubbed itself against her as though it were trying to congratulate her.

"I have been successful with everything but Johan's cow," she told the kitten, speaking seriously as though the cat were a person. "Tom Maitland broke his arm, and the other boy's good looks were ruined by my curse. It seems I am better at curses than at spells. But I will find something of Priscilla's and then I will curse long and well!"

It was almost a week before she found something of Priscilla's—a week in which she had to watch the happiness of the bride and groom. She tried to keep the hate she felt from showing in her face. She even was nice to Priscilla when they eventually met, but she did not shake hands with the girl. She could not bear to touch Priscilla's lovely white fingers, so she said her wrist had been sprained.

Priscilla was very solicitous about this injury. It was as though the devil had put the idea in Elsbeth's head, for through it she attained a handkerchief belonging to the girl. Priscilla said that if Elsbeth's wrist were bandaged tightly it would mend quicker. She had seen her father's do so. So Elsbeth let her bind it and exulted in the fact that Priscilla used her own kerchief for the bandage.

That night Elsbeth dressed the doll in the kerchief, leaned over it chanting magic words, then she took sharp pins and drove them into the doll, saying as she did so:

"As these gore deep into your flesh
I capture you within a mesh.
Pain and pain and pain will come
Until you are forever numb."

Then she got down on her knees and prayed.

"Oh Satan, my master, lord of all, grant that my spell will not fail. Send pain and misery and all the horrors you are ruler of to Priscilla Rider. I ask it in your name—I, Elsbeth Farquar the witch, one of your most humble servants who lives only to serve you. See, I write it in letters of blood on human skin." She took a little knife and, pricking her finger often, wrote on the flap of skin from the boy's face which she had long treasured.

"Elsbeth Farquar covenants with Satan, giving him her soul in return for the powers of witchery."

She signed her name, and as she did so the little black cat jumped on the table, licked her finger from which the blood still ran and then the edge of the flap of skin, leaving a reddish smear which looked exactly like a signature.

Elsbeth waved the skin high over her head, dancing about the room with glee.

"I am a witch . . . a witch! Satan has signed the covenant. Beware, Pris-

cilla, beware, for now your life is in my hands."

She had not put a needle where the doll's heart should have been. She did not want Priscilla to die at once. She wanted her to suffer so Johan would suffer. She could always put in the last needle that did mean death.

THE DAYS passed and Elsbeth watched Priscilla with hawklike eyes, but Priscilla's rose-and-white complexion remained unaltered. She did not grow pale, she did not grow ill, she seemingly had no pain. Her happiness was a joy for everyone except Elsbeth to see, and Johan's was as great.

Once more Elsbeth was faced with the realization that her spell was not working. She stuck the needle in the doll's heart, mumbled more incantations, and yet Priscilla went on her blithe, happy way. Not only was Priscilla undisturbed, but Mistress Finchley, who, by now, according to Elsbeth's calculations, should have been very ill, was stronger than ever before. Of course Elsbeth had no way of knowing that the herb, which she had considered a deadly poison, was just what Mistress Finchley, whose heart required stimulation, needed.

All these things convening together made Elsbeth more bitter than ever before. She was nasty and hateful. She snapped at everyone. Every time little Patience came near her she pushed her away. But the child kept persisting in showing her affection, and nothing Elsbeth said or did made any difference.

The boys, mindful of what had happened to their companions, kept out of her way, and the scarred face of the one who had mocked her was a constant reminder to them to beware of her. Priscilla, who had tried to be nice to her, prodded on by Johan—who still felt upset over the mischief he had wrought—soon realized that she might as well try to cultivate a stone, but still she kept trying. It seemed as though the more hateful Elsbeth became the nicer everyone tried to be to her. Even the Elders went out of their way to be pleasant, and her healing broths were in more and more demand as Mistress Finchley grew stronger and better each day.

Once when Cyrus Finchley thanked her for his wife's health, Elsbeth said boldly, not caring what happened, "Why should I not make cures? I am a witch." Her words carried no conviction, for in her heart she was beginning to doubt.

Cyrus laughed. "I am glad to hear you jest. For anyone else the subject would be a dangerous one, but for you whom we all know well and love, it is safe . . . for we know you could not be a witch."

Elsbeth ran away, crying, "I am, I am, but no one will believe . . . perhaps that is why my spells no longer work."

LATER, Elsbeth calm again, sat in front of her fire. On a little table before her was the witch's book and the grotesque doll which looked like a travesty of a pincushion. There was something frightening about it, for Elsbeth had spared the doll nothing. Pins were sticking in it at odd angles, through its mouth, eyes and ears. In fact there was hardly an unpierced spot upon it. The rude semblances of feet were melted and blackened. At one time in sheer desperation Elsbeth had tried burning the doll, with no success as far as its living counterpart was concerned,

though the result on the reproduction was drastic enough.

The kitten lay on Elsbeth's lap regarding the things on the table with indifference. It green eyes were placid; it was utterly unmoved by the turmoil that its mistress was in. Elsbeth, for the first time since the day in the woods when she had prayed to Satan, was looking facts squarely in the face.

"I am not a witch," she said to herself. "Satan did not hear my prayer. The kitten is only a kitten, the things that happened to the boys only coincidence. None of my spells has worked, not one of the charms—though I have done everything the book said. I have robbed graves in the dead of night, tried to make Mistress Finchley ill to pay her back for being sweet to Priscilla. All these things and more I have done and I am no nearer to my revenge on Johan Rider. There is no use. I will have to give up the thought of vengeance on Johan, although it irks me to do so."

Just as she said these words there came a knock on the door.

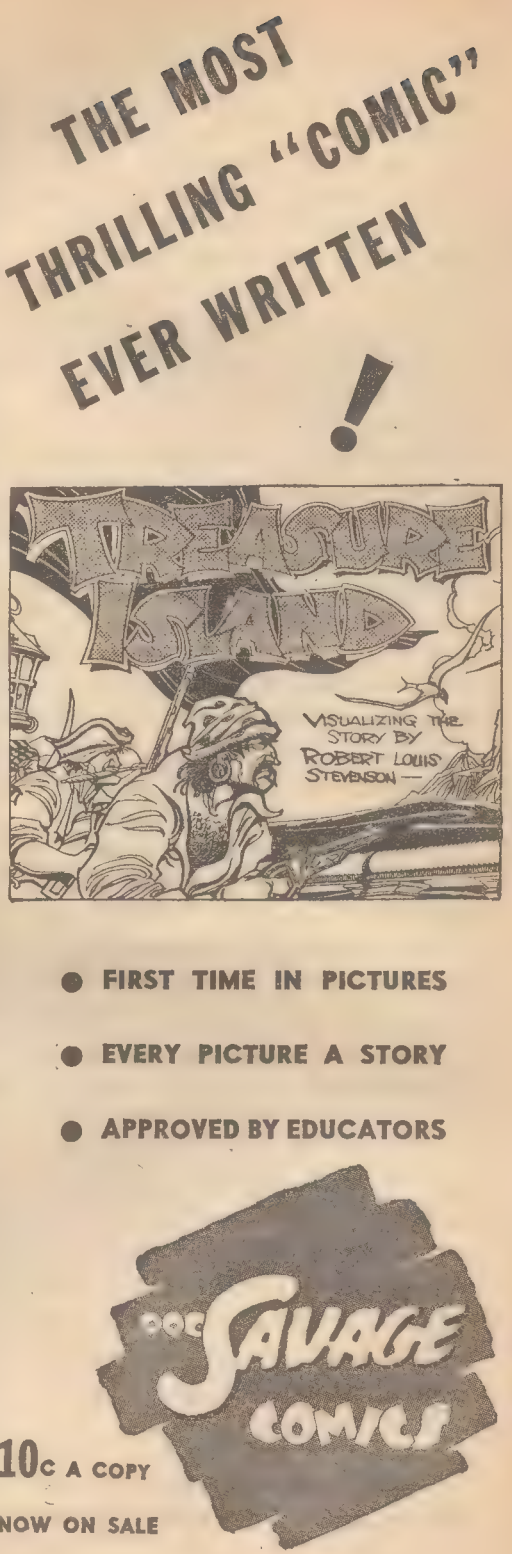
"Open, Elsbeth Farquar."

She started. She couldn't let anyone come in—not with the book and the doll in full sight, and those other grimmer relics hidden under her floor.

"Who is there?" she called.

"Cyrus Finchley's man. Come quickly. We need your help. Mistress Finchley is ill indeed."

"In a moment I will come." Quickly Elsbeth put the doll and book into their hiding place where the piece of skin already lay. She caught her black cloak around her shoulders and tried to keep the exultation out of her eyes. Satan *had* heard—there *was* power in her spells, only she had been too impatient to give them time to work. She fol-



lowed the manservant thrilling with excitement. Just as they reached the Finchley house a woman came running out with tears on her cheeks.

"Oh . . . oh . . . the good lady is dead. But now she was laughing, telling the master not to worry, and then suddenly she clutched her breast, gave a loud cry of agony and fell down dead. Alas . . . alas!"

Cyrus Finchley, white and drawn, came to the door.

"You are too late, daughter, too late. Yet I am grateful to you. Only today my wife spoke of your ministrations and how much better she had been."

"But now she is dead." Elsbeth spoke unthinkingly, "I have killed her." There was triumph in her voice. At last her spell had worked, the spell she had said when she put the nightshade in the draught. At last she was sure she was a witch and that she would yet have her revenge on Johan. She lifted her head and laughed long and hard.

The man and woman looked at her strangely. Cyrus Finchley, however, smiled sadly and patted her shoulder.

"Grief is like that sometimes," he told the man. "She loved Mistress Finchley. See that she gets home safely. Good night, Elsbeth. You must not brood. You did not kill my wife; you helped her and gave joy to her last days. It was the Lord who called her home." He went inside and shut the door.

His man took Elsbeth's arm.

"I will see you to your house again as the master bade me."

Elsbeth went willingly enough. She wanted to be home; she had things to do.

ONCE inside her own house with the door bolted fast Elsbeth began to work. First she took the doll from its hiding place. She held it for a moment then began to chant:

"The doll is Priscilla—
Priscilla is the doll,
The powers of evil I invoke,
As this doll goes up in smoke,
So Priscilla's soul will go,
Beyond the reach of man to know.
And I add this further spell
She shall soon with Satan dwell.
Nevermore in death or life
Will Johan possess his wife.
Priscilla is the doll—
The doll is Priscilla."

Concentrated hate flowed through her veins as she threw the doll into the heart of the flames.

She watched it burn. Her eyes lost nothing of the changes it went through —the flare of the burning linen, the sizzling of the fat, then the flames dying lower as the outlines melted into nothing and finally went up the chimney in a puff of smoke.

"I am a witch," she told the kitten solemnly, "a mighty witch. This is my night of nights. I must do yet more while my master is helping me. While Priscilla screams out her soul in agony I will ride—yes, ride over her roof top and hear her cries. The flying ointment! I will make that and ride on my broomstick as a true witch should. I have been too timid to try before, but now I am no longer afraid."

Quickly, as though the devil were standing beside her egging her on she set about making the ointment. Once more the pot was hung over the crackling logs and she began boiling a most loathsome mess, saying at the same time, magic words which the book claimed were infallible. When she had finished it all and the paste had cooled, she

slipped off her dress and rubbed the ointment over her body. Then she put her dress back on again because habit was strong in her and even though she would be riding on a broomstick high over the houses she couldn't bear the thought that anyone would see her unless she were properly dressed.

ALREADY Elsbeth had a strange sensation of movement. It seemed, as she walked around the room, she had a feeling of flying. She felt as if she were floating and she knew the moment had come for her to mount her broom. She got it out of its corner and was just about to straddle it when she realized there was not space enough for her to sail through the windows. They were all too tiny to permit the passage of her body. She must do better than that.

A thought came to her. There was a trapdoor in the attic that was wide enough. She ran up the attic stairs and opened the trapdoor and climbed on its rim. The kitten had followed her and was now perched on her shoulder, its favorite place. Elsbeth did not mind; she was glad to have the company of her familiar on her jaunt. She looked up at the sky. From where she stood it seemed so close.

This was a marvelous taking-off place. The sensation of flying quivering over her was even stronger than it had been. She mounted the broomstick and, turning the tip end toward Johan's farm, without the slightest hesitation, lurched herself forward into space. For a second she felt the exhilaration of sailing through the air, but in its wake came a sickening sensation.

For one horrible moment she realized the charm hadn't worked. She was falling. She screamed with all her strength, then with a terrible thud her body hit the ground.

Everything blurred. A little moan brought her back to her senses. The kitten—it lay under her, its moans growing fainter. She tried to move to help it but found she could not move at all. She heard the kitten moaning until its moans grew fainter and died away as a little bubble of air in water. She began to hear activity—doors opening, people running, the things they were calling, "Someone is hurt!" "It was from here!" "This way—" She tried to call to direct them but she couldn't speak.

The flying ointment had failed her. She had done something wrong. What?—she wondered lying there unable to move, but with no paint of any sort. Well, it didn't matter; so long as the spell for Priscilla was successful nothing else mattered. Even if she died she didn't care. She would have Priscilla's company in the devil's abode. Had she not sent her there herself? Had not the doll, that was Priscilla, burned?

She could see the people now. They had found her and were gathering around. Even Cyrus Finchley was there kneeling beside her. She looked at him with her great eyes.

"Daughter, daughter, what happened?" he whispered.

"She must have been cleaning her attic. See, the door is open and her broom is here." Elsbeth recognized Mistress Maitland's voice. "She must have leaned out to shake the broom and fallen. My Patience will be so upset; she loves Elsbeth."

Elsbeth tried to tell Mistress Maitland she was wrong but found she could not speak.

"Hush, she is conscious. I can tell by her eyes," Cyrus Finchley cried.

More people had come; she was glad to see that Johan wasn't among them. Of course Johan couldn't come; Priscilla was probably dead by now. If Elsbeth could have chuckled, she would have.

Dr. Prouty arrived, made a hasty examination.

"Completely paralyzed—she'll never move again," he whispered very low to Cyrus but Elsbeth heard. It didn't matter to Elsbeth—not even when he said, "There are internal injuries too . . . and her heart—"

ELSBETH didn't hear the rest. She didn't care. She had accomplished all she wanted in her revenge on Johan. She only wished they could know she had been a witch. The things people were saying now about her sweetness made her want to laugh but even that didn't matter. She had had her triumphs—Tom Maitland, the other boy, Mistress Finchley and Priscilla. Her revenge on Johan was all that really counted and she was sure of that—as sure as she was of being the cause of Mistress Finchley's demise. There was a light of triumph in her eyes—rejoicing as she thought of her revenge on Johan.

Cyrus Finchley leaned over her.

"You understand what I say, daughter?"

She looked at him.

"Yes, I know she does," Cyrus told the doctor. "Tell her, friend, about my wife. She said early tonight she was afraid she'd killed her. We must set her mind at rest."

Once more Elsbeth wanted to laugh, regretted she could not. Afraid she'd killed Mistress Finchley—when she knew she had!

The doctor knelt by her.

"Do not worry about that, Elsbeth. Mistress Finchley was marked for death. Her heart was very bad. It's a wonder she lived as long as she did. It was undoubtedly your potion that helped keep her alive. I have studied the ingredients you used these past days and find that they are most beneficial. I shall use the draught myself."

A poison helpful? Why did they misunderstand so? Elsbeth wanted to scream out the truth, but she could not.

More people coming and then Priscilla's voice.

"Oh, Elsbeth, Elsbeth . . . we came as soon as we knew . . . Johan and I—"

Priscilla! Priscilla looking as she always looked—beautiful and serene. Sorry for Elsbeth, pitying her, but still full of the inner peace that only happiness and love can bring.

Johan had it too—that inner pace. His voice broke as he looked at Elsbeth.

"Poor, poor Elsbeth . . . she was my friend."

Priscilla leaned down and kissed Elsbeth's forehead. At the same time Johan kissed her inert hand.

The triumph died out of Elsbeth's eyes. It was driven away by the mental anguish. She was facing the knowledge of her failure. She had not succeeded in anything!

All around her people whose consciences were suddenly smitten because they hadn't been kind to her and had disliked her ugliness began singing her praises, and each word was like a stab in Elsbeth's heart. She hadn't wanted to be kind; she'd wanted to be hateful and mean. She had tried to be but it was as though a conspiracy had existed

against her. People had refused to notice her nastiness. She had wanted to be a witch, she had prayed to Satan, signed a blood covenant with the lord of evil to win revenge on Johan, but she had had no revenge, no satisfaction. What was Johan saying?

"See, she is suffering . . . there is pain in her eyes."

"She cannot feel pain," the doctor pronounced solemnly.

"Then she suffers for us . . . because we grieve." Priscilla's eyes were full of tears. Johan took his wife's hand; as their eyes met, Elsbeth could see their love for each other.

She made a gigantic effort—it was as though the bitterness in her must find an outlet.

"No . . . no," she screamed. "I hate you all! I am a witch . . . I . . . I—"

Her voice died away in a frightful gurgle.

"She is out of her head," Johan said pityingly. "As though Elsbeth could possibly be a witch!"

His words were the final straw to her misery. Elsbeth moaned a little as the kitten had done. It made her remember the kitten—her one friend—and she had killed it. Utter frustration swept over her along with a merciful blackness.

I, ALICE STRAND, awoke gasping as my hand fell away from the patch that looked like human skin. It *had* been human skin. I knew that now. A pathetic fragment somehow saved down the ages—all that was left of Elsbeth Farquar, and the tortured, frustrated soul that had been hers. I knew if I could see its other side, Elsbeth's writing would be there. Sitting up in the great four-poster bed in Aunt Amabel's guest room I shuddered.

THE END.

Nine years old—and ten thousand dollars on his head!

● Slans! The supermen! Every human hated them—and there was a ten-thousand-dollar reward for every *dead* slan.

And Jommy Cross was a slan—a nine-year-old boy fleeing from the street corner where he'd just seen his slan mother shot dead in the street—fleeing with a bullet in his side from the secret police of the World Dictator. His father shot down months before—and the hand of every human being on Earth stretched out to him—to grab! DON'T MISS **"SLAN"** by A. E. van Vogt—in

Astounding
SCIENCE-FICTION

BLACK CATS

by CRISTEL HASTINGS

They slink down furtive alleyways,
    Shunning the corner lights,
Seeking the gloom of a somber yard
    Instead of the moonlit heights.

Only their eyes glow like phosphorous,
    Steady, unblinking and sly,
Retreating with shadows that lose themselves
    As a milk cart rumbles by.

Sniffing at this and sneezing at that,
    Dainty, yet furtive and mean,
Matching their wits with the mongrel breed,
    Licking their long whiskers clean.

The black cats of midnight are phantoms
    Traveling on soft-cushioned feet,
Preferring dim alleys to arc lamps
    That brighten the well-traveled street.

TYPEWRITER IN THE SKY

by L. RON HUBBARD

Second of two parts. His friend had written him into his novel of Caribbean piracy—as the villain who was to meet an unpleasant end! And he had to live that story, had, somehow to break it!

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

SYNOPSIS

Horace Hackett was an author, a pretty ordinary adventure-yarn author, different only at the moment in being in a jam. He'd gotten an advance from his publisher on a proposed tale of Caribbean pirates—"Blood and Loot." Only, when the publisher asked for the

manuscript, calling at Hackett's Greenwich Village apartment, all Hackett had was receipts for the already-spent advance, and a complete blank. Hurriedly, he started sketching in a plot, making it up as he went. His friend, Michael de Wolf, concert pianist, happened to be there, and listened rather boredly till Hackett, in desperation, announced that the villain of his yarn was to be a Spanish don who would be exactly like De Wolf—in fact, he told the publisher, he would be written on De Wolf.

The locale is to be St. Kitts—the time 1640. Tom Bristol, a young Englishman, is to be the hero; Lady Marion, spitfire daughter of an English merchant prince of St. Kitts, the heroine. Her father is to back Bristol in his efforts to overthrow the Spanish power in the Caribbean; the villain—Mike de Wolf, renamed Miguel de Lobo—to be the admiral of the Spanish fleet. He is to meet Lady Marion when he is shipwrecked on the coast of St. Kitts—

And abruptly, Mike de Wolf finds himself struggling in the offshore breakers of St. Kitts! He is IN Horace Hackett's story!

He is shipwrecked there—he does meet Lady Marion—it is 1640—and nothing he can do can change it! Further, he's the villain—because Horace Hackett said so!—and all Hackett's villains die at the end!

His only hope is to try to twist that story out of Hackett's hands, to force the plot to change in his favor!

But what Hackett says is so, is so—in the story. Hackett states that Mike is unbeatable with a rapier; therefore Mike is unbeatable. Hackett suddenly decides that his "De Lobo" should have a cape. Presto! out of nowhere a cape wraps itself around Mike. Every now and then, Mike finds that his words are not his words; they're being forced on him because Hackett, somewhere up in the sky, has written them down and said those were his words.

And nothing is quite right, or quite reliable. The sun may pause in the sky if Hackett forgets to move it. There's a piano in the main hall of Lord Carstone's—Lady Marion's father—semi-castle. But the label on it says "Steinway, Chicago"!

Hackett's plot is building swiftly. And as it builds, so Mike de Wolf abruptly acquires various memories he never had—because Hackett has suddenly said he had 'em!

He is now in the home of Lord Carstone, as a guest, where he was taken by Lady Marion after being rescued from the sea. He has claimed to be Irish, though admitting his name is "De Lobo," explaining that when the Spanish armada was wrecked on the coasts of Ireland, a Spanish don who survived married into his family, was his grandfather.

But it is announced that Tom Bristol is entering the harbor of St. Kitts with his ships, some Spanish prisoners—and a collection of native Indians, the Maroons, whom the Spanish—as Mike suddenly "remembers"—have been mistreating under his orders! These Maroons will know him, reveal him as the admiral of the Spanish fleet, to be killed as a spy.

But the Maroons never get a chance to see him; it is one of the Spanish prisoners—a little cabin boy—who gives him away as he and the others are inspecting the prisoners. As the boy calls out, "Almirante! Almirante!" the trouble starts.

And with it—clank! and the prisoners, instead of being all chained together,

as they have been, are abruptly chained separately, free to use their remaining manacles as weapons. Hackett's lent a helping decree!

They escape together, board one of Tom Bristol's ships by capturing it, and leave St. Kitts to go to the Spanish town of Nombre de Dios. There Mike mopes for three months while his reinforcements come from Spain He mopes because Hackett said he did. The sky is ever-blue, and the sea is ever-blue for the same reason. Hackett is creating and running this world by fiat—and it's still bound for the ultimate death of Mike de Wolf.

The town is dominated by Father Mercy, a repellent and vicious-minded creation of Hackett's, and by the local governer, Lord Bagatela—who is simply a bore. And Mike has one guard who's absolutely, unswervingly loyal—because Hackett said he was!—the giant-bodied, pinheaded Trombo.

Mike has only one hope of defeating Hackett's plans. Horace can't watch—and write about—all scenes and settings at once, and if, while Hackett's concerned with some other point, Mike can slip in and get Bristol, he may force Hackett to change his plot. In this hope, Mike, commanding his fleet, attacks an unexpected English point—Tortuga.

And finds that that is according to Hackett's plot. For in the action there, he captures Lady Marion—which, he was long before sure, was what Hackett would next make him do. For he knows the ways of Hackett's plots.

Further, in preventing Hackett's Father Mercy from getting English prisoners for the torture rack—they were heretics in Father Mercy's eyes—he has gotten the church's local representative down on him. By punishing his men for their looting at Tortuga—which they felt was their right—he is inciting mutiny. And he can't help it, because Horace Hackett is making him say and do those things!

No TYPEWRITER whirred above Nombre de Dios now. The ever-blue sea, the ever-wandering women, the ever-working slaves in the dockyards went on in their unvarying functions. The fever took its victims and, still hungry, took more. The merchants assembled for the transshipment of bullion and jewels and, as ever, swiftly dispersed as soon as a fleet had sailed.

And Mike brooded in his great, shadowy house as the weeks went by. Events were happening elsewhere. Nombre de Dios was in a lull before the storm began to blast it. And if Mike knew the plots of Horace Hackett, the latter quarter of the book had been entered upon and the latter quarter of Horace Hackett's books always dealt strictly with the victory and his savage surge to final victory. Horace Hackett had abandoned Nombre de Dios as a Spanish scene. Mike knew that when next it came under the invisible spotlight of Horace's questionable genius it would be with an English attack. No more pulling of Mike's puppet strings. No more painting the villain. That was all done and the villain was strictly upon his own, awaiting, despite anything he could do, his "just desserts."

In a way Mike was thankful, for it meant freedom of motion and speech. He would not again find his own mind betrayed into stupid actions and stilted speeches. He had a huge fleet, he had the guns of the fort to protect it. Behind him lay the Isthmus and the count-

less ambuscades into which the buccaneers must fall before they could come up to final grips. And if Horace Hackett thought he was going to push Tom Bristol through to the defeat of the Spaniards, the recovery of Lady Marion and the death of one Mike de Wolf without terrific opposition, then Horace Hackett had better go buy a plot jinni.

Left alone, Mike felt better. While it had been fine winning sword fights and forts with the help of the author, it had so irked Mike's sense of individuality that it was now almost with relief that he faced the final scenes, strictly on his own. He could say what he wanted and do what he wanted.

Knowing Hackett, he knew this. That he could run away from the scene and responsibility had several times occurred to him, but he did not trust his apparent ability to escape. He had a feeling that if he sailed out it would be to captivity in the hands of the buccaneers. And if he ran away into the Isthmus either Father Mercy or the Indians would attend to his finish. No, he had to remain at his post and ready himself for the final onslaught.

He sent out pinnaces to flit up and down the coast with orders to scud back to Nombre de Dios with any intelligence of the English. He sent letters to the governors of other Spanish colonies advising them that the English would soon retaliate. He inspected his fleet, or some portion of it, almost daily and held many conferences with his captains.

But all was not well. That speech he had made to Father Mercy had undermined his influence. The near-mutiny which Horace—he now realized—had made him talk himself into was still in the atmosphere, making it even more sultry.

As MIKE came up the walk to his house one afternoon he found Fernando waiting for him. The captain was spurred and mud-spattered after a hard ride from Panama across the mountains. His long face was haggard.

"Buenas," said Mike.

Fernando bowed, a little stiffly. "I come to seek you, sire, with dispatches from the governor at Panama."

Mike tossed his hat to a chair and let Trombo pull off the cloak. He took the packet. "Well? You can tell me what's in them as well as though you'd read them."

Fernando crimsoned. "Yes, sire. The letter on top informs you that the panic you are spreading because of the English must be stopped because our blow at Tortuga will settle them for years to come. The next letter is from the bishop of Panama, telling you that you are to turn over the Lady Marion to Father Mercy for escort to Panama and examination by the bishop himself. The letter under that is from Anne, telling you that if you show so much preference for the English she will demonstrate the power of influence she has with the governor of Panama and that unless you give your Lady Marion over to the bishop, you may regret it. Forgive me for knowing these things but all Panama is sizzling with gossip about it."

"And you," said Mike, "let them sizzle."

Fernando shrugged.

"Perhaps you agree with them," said Mike.

Again Fernando shrugged. "Sire, I have already tried to make you understand the gravity of your action."

"Perhaps," said Mike, "you went to

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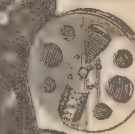

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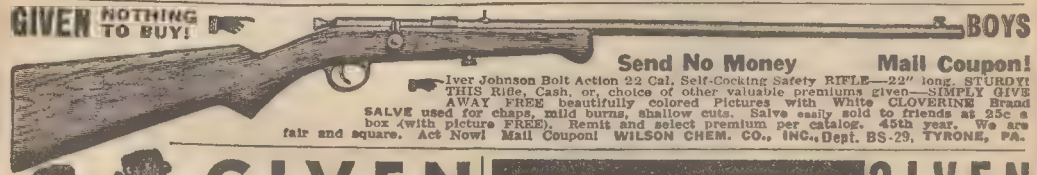

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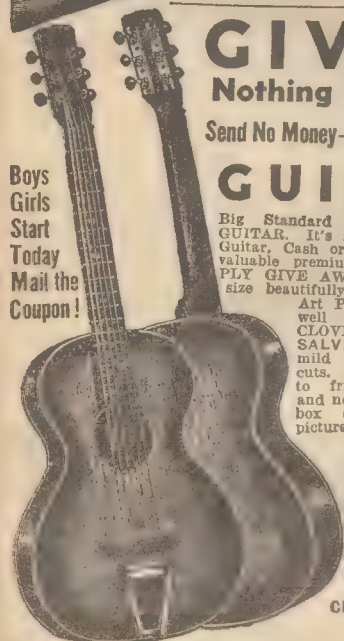

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Panama just to make me see it further."

Fernando avoided his eyes.

"And perhaps," said Mike, "you'd like to have me show the white feather to Bristol by sending this woman back

"You'll not get that English girl for your racks, if I have to fight all Spain to stop it!" Mike snapped.

to him. If I did that, the English would have no high opinion of our ability to defend ourselves. It would be a tacit surrender. If I give over the Lady Marion to the bishop or Father Mercy, the results would be so horrible that no power on earth could stop this Bristol in his vengeance."

"And if you hold her here," said Fernando, "you destroy your own authority, your own career."

"Because of the stupidity of fools like you," said Mike, beginning to get mad. "Come into the house and ask the Lady Marion, if you like, what treatment she has received at my hands. Yes, of course that shocks you. But come anyway." And he forced Fernando inside.

The great hall stretched its shadowy depths before them for the blinds were drawn against the heat of the day. Massive furniture gleamed dully and the breeze rippled the tapestries.

"Trombo," said Mike, "inform the Lady Marion that we would like to see her here."

Trombo, like some hulking, hairless bear, waddled away. In the distance sounded a slammed door and a heavy thud and then Trombo came back feeling a new bruise upon his arm, looking guiltily at Mike. "She say 'no.'"

Mike turned to Fernando. "She is my prisoner and nothing more. Now do you understand my position?"

Fernando looked at the bruise on Trombo's arm. "Well—"

Mike took the packet of letters and tore them in half all at once. He handed the fragments, with seals intact, back to Fernando. "You had a hard ride, captain. You've still a long ways to go. Perhaps you had better be on your way."

"On my way? Whither?"

"To the governor of Panama, to the bishop, to Anne. Tell them what I have told you and give them back these. Tell them that they are the best allies that Tom Bristol ever had. Now go."

Fernando sighed and got up. He wanted badly to object for it is a long, long ways from Nombre de Dios to Panama City and the Isthmus was acrawl with revolting Maroons. He tightened his sword belt and put on his cloak and, spurs rasping sullenly, went away.

"Trouble, my almirante?" said Trombo.

"Maybe."

"Almirante, I, Trombo, do not understand just how it is that this English woman can continue to disobey you. Why, no other woman ever hated the almirante. Maybe a good length of belt, neatly applied, might bring her—"

"I don't need your advice," said Mike. "Mutiny, religion, insubordination and now you tell me how to handle women. Go take a jump in the first lake you meet!"

Trombo sorrowfully went away from there and left Mike to his woes. And for an hour or two Mike nursed them with feeling language. They were all so convinced of Spanish superiority! All so sold on a man's duty to the church!

He paced back and forth, back and forth, passing each time a baby-grand piano in the corner, reading, despite himself, the gold letters on it, "Steinway, Chicago."

What a fraud all this was! What a mixed-up mess! He'd seen "Pittsburgh" on the steel cutlasses of the buccaneers. "C. I. O." stamped upon the lumber which was going into those galleons. Damn Horace Hackett for a blundering fool, unable to visualize a period completely. Why, it wouldn't be surprising to see Bristol hove into sight

firing Lewis machine guns! Oh! By all that was unholy, why hadn't he, Mike, ever paid any attention to such crafts! Lewis machine guns against Bristol! But he knew he couldn't even fire one, much less make one. No amount of knowledge of a true world could correct anything in this.

To hell with that damned piano! And he banged both hands down on the keys. The instrument yelped in protest and Mike did it again. And then, because it was natural for him, he sank down on the bench and began to roll out a savage, melancholy concerto. But, little by little, the music soothed him and he began to play more softly.

For an hour and more his fingers roamed over the keys and he grew quieter until he had almost forgotten his troubles, aware only of music. It was with a start that he realized someone was standing against the window ledge looking at him. It was Lady Marion.

In her amber gown—for by author-magic she had landed here fully equipped—she looked even more heart-arresting than she had when he had seen her in St. Kitts.

"Don't stop," she said quietly.

Mike did not stop but played on, softly, looking at her, wondering why she had been so violent to Trombo and himself before but chose now to come out of her fortress. He guessed that she was about to plead for her own release and, when that was refused, would begin to storm anew. But music evidently had its effect upon her and he was careful to maintain it.

"A little while ago," she said, "I saw one of your officers come here. With dispatches."

"Yes," said Mike noncommittally.

"And when you sent for me and I refused to come—I opened the door again and heard what you said. In the many weeks—or is it months?—that I have been here I have learned some Spanish."

Mike cocked an ear at the ceiling and ceased playing for a moment. No slightest sign of a typewriter. "Yes?" he urged, continuing his playing.

"You refused to turn me over to the church no matter how they threatened you. What would they do to me?"

"Burn you as a heretic."

"Yes . . . yes, I thought that was it."

"But you see no helmeted guard out there, with crosses on their chests, waiting, do you? You have nothing to fear."

"No . . . I don't think that I have. But I was not thinking of myself . . . so much. Your men think it strange that you keep me here. That Fernando has argued with you before to send me away."

"Yes. I refuse to pamper Bristol. And with you as hostage he might not attack."

"He won't believe you. He'll think me dead. You have a glib tongue, Michael; you proved that on St. Kitts. It would be much safer for you to send me away."

"So you ask for that again? Am I to trust the crew with which I would send you? Am I to risk a trap by trying to land you on St. Kitts?"

IT OCCURRED to Mike that instant that he was taking all this far too seriously and that, in addition, he was lying. He had moldered here for months, dreaming about her, thinking about her, aching for her, and now here she stood, the object of all that misery, the only true happiness for which he could hope before he perished as perish he most

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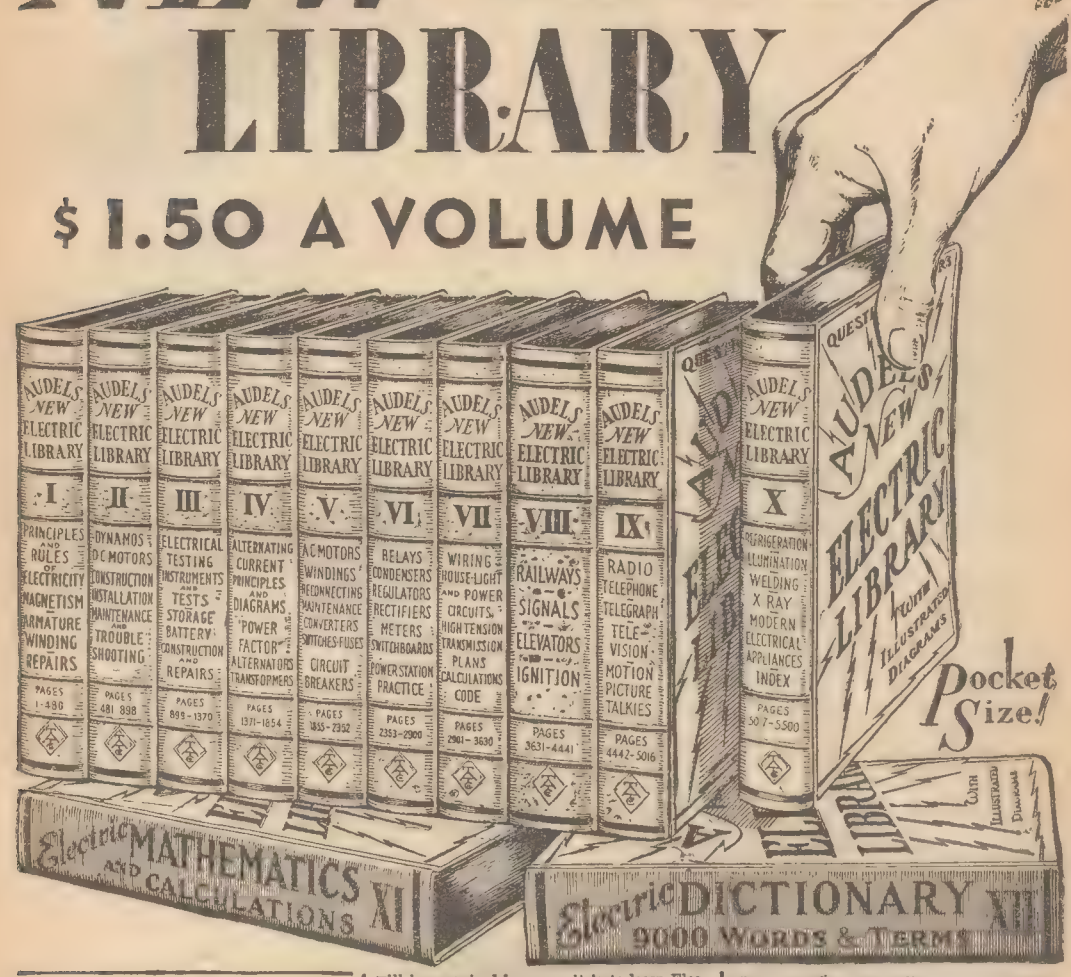
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certainly might at the hands of the soon-to-attack buccaneers.

His playing became dreamy. "You have a very bad opinion of me, milady, having seen me enact a role at St. Kitts to save my own neck and having witnessed the sack of Tortuga. And I have only to say that I did not order anything but a battle there and am now in trouble because I punished my men so much for running amuck."

"I . . . realize that now."

"There is something which I have wanted to tell you for some time," continued Mike, looking only at the keys. "It has to do with why I am here, where I came from, where we are going." He lowered the music to somberness. "You do not know it but you are only the character in a story. A lovely, devastating character, it is true, and one who is, I find, really alive." He waited for her to question that, but she was still. "We," he continued, "are all characters in a story, nothing more. But once I was in another world, the world which will some day read this story and be somewhat amused. There I know the author. And I know other stories by him and know how he thinks and writes so that here I also know. Bristol is going to storm this place. You will ultimately be returned to Bristol and I shall be killed. That is the way this story is scheduled to run. And I am trapped here. I came without being asked and was made to play this part of villain no matter how I opposed it. I am doubtful if I will ever return to that other world."

She was studying him. "Forsooth, sir, you carry that simile far. That playwright Shakespeare wrote in a play I saw in London that all the world is a stage and that we are merely the actors. But by what strange necromancy can you attempt the blasphemy of knowing God, knowing how He thinks and what He will do?"

"Your god, milady," said Mike, "is not the god you suppose him. You have lived your life in this world and this is only a world of fantasy. You remember far back and know that you were born, have people; you have seen pain and misery and happiness. You yourself are of warm, living flesh and blood. I give up the effort of trying to make you understand from whence I came and why I am here."

"No one ever asked to be born, few ever ask for the parts they have to play," said Lady Marion. "And all men, in all their actions, think they are doing exactly right. But, milord admiral, this is not settling the problem of my disposition."

"Yes," said Mike, "I think it is. Whatever I do and however I do it, the end will, of course, be the same. Bristol will win, will take you back and I will be killed."

"No one man can change destiny, milord, if you speak of that. I am afraid that it is only melancholy which leads you to such direful prophecy for yourself."

"You are here now," said Mike. "Why should I completely drown myself in misery by sending you away again? Let Bristol take you away—if he can. Let this plot run its course—if it will. But there is one thing, milady, which cannot change, and that—" He stood up, facing her.

She looked into his face with sudden awareness and her breathing quickened. Her hands were slightly raised as though to fend him off, but not so high as to actually do so. "Milord—" she said tremulously.

Mike saw his enemy before the cannon's mouth, and touched the quick-match as Tom Bristol leaped—

"Milady," said Mike gathering her to him and holding her tightly against him. "I love you," he whispered.

She thrust at him and tried to get free, but his arms were strong and his lips, seeking hers, were gentle. And

then her arms ceased their flailing and her hands crept up across his flat, straight back and locked there.

"Oh—my darling," she whispered.

IX.

For a month direful news came to Nombre de Dios by a seemingly endless stream of messengers. The pirates had sacked Robelo. They had gutted a merchantman and put her crew to the plank. Bistol himself had led an attack upon Santa Ysabel and not a Spaniard in the fortress had been left alive. Everywhere the buccaneer fleet ranged in search of the Spanish fleet, but ships were slow and, at this season, winds were few. The advice boats and scouts of Miguel Saint Raoul de Lobo failed utterly to locate the elusive pinnaces and carracks under the bloody banner of England. Refugees—those few who got through the wilderness and past the Indians—came crawling into Nombre de Dios with tales of horror which set Spanish teeth on edge.

"You must attack! You must find them and wipe them from the seas!" howled Governor Bagatela, banging his cane down on the walk and turning purple.

"Aye, and leave this harbor with only your forts to hold it," said Mike. "To leave completely open the road to Panama. If I contact them for certain, I'll attack. But to wander out upon the Main with every Indian on the shore passing information on to the English, would be to do just what Bristol wants us to do. Here we stay until they are seen."

And Fernando, commanding a galleon out on scout, came back without word of the buccaneers save that he had found Terra Nueva a charred patch of black strewn with what bodies the Caribs had considered inedible.

"They've loosed the Indians upon us," said Fernando. "They've given them guns and knives and hatchets and it's said the English are paying a bounty of a pound for every Spanish head that is brought to them."

"That last is a lie," said Mike. "Bristol is in command of that fleet somewhere out there and Bristol only wants one thing. He probably seeks to draw us away from this place by attacking small, unfortified spots. Then, by a list of successes he continually strengthens his fleet. Bristol wants the Lady Marion back, for he must know from spies here that she is still alive. His men want gold. They don't give a damn about king and empire. They're buccaneers, already scarred with the bastinadoes and cats of his majesty's royal navy. Calm down. Eventually Bristol will have to make his brag good and attack Nombre de Dios. When he does we'll roll him up like a sheet of paper and throw him away."

It was a definite stand to take, but he could take it with the powers he had. Messages from the governor of Panama he answered all in one phrase, "Are you so eager to be gobbled by the buccaneer that you'll remove me?" Sheer bravado but it had a slight effect.

Father Mercy, white-hot for English blood, came storming to the house on the hill. "They're murdering priests! They're killing every Spaniard that wears the cross. They're exalting the blasphemous Protestant creed! Out after them, you coward! Why do you sit here shivering in port while they sweep Spain from the Main? Does that English—"

Mike struck him to his knees and Father Mercy, in real terror, his rage quite

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cooled, looked up at the tall, beautiful devil whose rapier point licked avidly before the priestly nose.

"Down that hill and into your church," said Mike. "Pray for the souls of the people killed by the buccaneers and add a prayer for yourself, thanking your God that He put me in between the buccaneer fleet and the shore here at Nombre de Dios. They'll string you up fast enough as it is if they catch you."

Father Mercy went down the hill.

ANOTHER MONTH passed with more alarms and wild guesses and sacked villages and vanished cargo vessels, and Mike waited patiently, knowing very well that he could do no good ranging the Main, and understanding clearly Bristol's real goal. Bristol would have to come to Nombre de Dios.

A short message went out from Mike via an Indian who was suspected of being a spy:

SIR PIRATE:

Your fate is already determined. I object seriously to being considered so thick-witted as to mistake your true intentions. Butchering Spaniards from Cartagena to Florida may keep your men amused, but, personally, the uproar you've created bores me. The Lady Marion is well and safe as the bearer, who is probably in your pay, will attest. Kindly fall upon Nombre de Dios so that we can have done with you.

Your obedient servant,
MIGUEL ST. R. DE LOBO,
Almirante.

P. S.: The Lady Marion wishes to send her love.

The note was answered a few weeks later:

SIR SPY:

Please tell the Lady Marion that we are coming after her immediately and please have her bags packed. BRISTOL.

"I hope," said Mike at the supper table that night, "that Bristol is as good a commander as he is made out to be.

Or perhaps that the god in the case is witty enough to see the import behind this."

"You make me uncomfortable with your talk of 'god,' Mike."

The candlelight caught in her hair, flame answering flame. And the goblet of wine which she held matched her beautiful eyes. Mike grinned happily. Why shouldn't he be happy for a little while?"

"Shall I order your bags packed, my dear?" said Mike.

"That little horse you gave me today is a darling," said the Lady Marion.

And so the matter stood.

Mike was not in error about Hackett this time, for such an obvious bit of strategy could not go past without notice. No admiral with any sense at all would hurl a fleet at a port which was expecting him. Rather, he would hold off, prepare himself, lie quiet for a space and so convince the enemy that he does not wish to accept the challenge.

And so Mike won a little more time —which proved his own undoing.

X.

THE GOLD train came from Panama. Little mules gay with bells, musketeers brave in yellow and scarlet and steel, merchants who had waddled over the rough trail in slave-borne sedan chairs, and gold, emeralds, silver and silver and emeralds and gold came streaming into Nombre de Dios. And with them came Lord Entristecer, governor of Panama.

Nombre de Dios glittered and hummed and the surface of the harbor was laced by the wakes of boats and barges dashing to and fro. The ships from Spain stood salt-stained in the roads awaiting their precious cargoes and the Spanish fleet swung dazzlingly from cables, looking dangerous. All day and all night the town teemed with people and resounded with music and quarreling.

The governor of Panama and the governor of Nombre de Dios—the latter being much junior—dined in state with all the nobles present. Great platters of meat and high bottles of wine and dishes of gold and a slave behind each chair. It was a gala dinner, entirely too gay to foreshadow disaster. And yet, when it was done, Lord Entristecer withdrew into the coolness of the drawing room, indicating that he wanted only three men to accompany him—Lord Bagatela, Mike and Captain Fernando.

"Gentlemen," said the melancholy lord of the New World, "I have news."

"And I also have news," said Mike.

"Yours first, then," said the sad governor.

"It is probable that the fleet will be attacked on the high seas by Bristol and the English," said Mike, "for all this gold is high bait. It is my plan, which I may tell you in detail later, to send only a small escort with the plate fleet and to keep the main body to windward in such a way as to catch the English napping. For I've a notion that when Bristol sees how few are guarding the plate fleet he will detach but few to take it. Then Bristol will send the bulk of his ships to attack Nombre de Dios. Up will come our fleet, crush the portion of Bristol's and then, turning, come down on Nombre de Dios and crush him against the guns of the forts. This plan is based on my knowledge of the psychology of . . . . of Bristol. If—"

"Your news is not news," said the melancholy old man from Panama. "It is strategy which looks very slim. And, Sir Miguel, it is not likely to be put to use."

"How's this?" said Mike. "Am I not admiral of—"

"You are not," said the governor from Panama. "Today, with the coming of the ships from Spain, I received this dispatch from his most Catholic majesty the king." He took it out and unrolled it. "As you can see for yourself, Sir Miguel, it removes you from command. I had asked for more, but this is all the reply. You will notice that it places Captain Fernando in complete charge of naval operations on the Main."

Mike steadied himself and gave Fernando a contemptuous glare and then, before they could say more, he stalked from the room.

Much later that night, sitting in the moonlight window of his room, Mike imparted the news to the Lady Marion.

"Then . . . then," she said, "you no longer can command anything?"

"Neither afloat nor ashore," said Mike.

"Who did this?"

"Several people."

"And I . . . I have been the cause of it all!"

"No," lied Mike. "Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," she wept.

"Have you no thought of what might happen to you?" said Mike.

Evidently she had not yet considered that, but she looked up at him proudly. "You would not let them touch me."

"No," said Mike. "No, of course not."

And in the morning, when Father Mercy came armed with stacks of documents and accompanied by two squads of church troops, he found the entrance to the admiral's home barricaded.

"Open up!" cried Father Mercy. "Open up in the name of God!"

A bullet clipped the hairs of his head and he hastily went down the hill again, his soldiers tumbling after.

FIVE days later a ship stood into the roadstead of Nombre de Dios. She moved sluggishly for her belly was full of sea water and her masts had been mowed as though by a scythe. But, limping under jury rig, wanly flying her battle flag from a splintered truck, she managed to brace about for the last mile up the channel and get her anchor down. There was something sorrowful about the way she swung into the wind.

The town went down to cluster on the quay and wait silently for news. A barge went out, carrying Lord Bagatela.

"Make way," whispered the people in the back of the crowd. And people moved to one side and the tall, ominous figure of Mike made its way to the stone steps where the barge must land upon its return.

A priest squeaked in excitement and dashed off to find some church troops, but Mike did not even deign to notice his going. Hand on hilt, cloak stirring a little in the wind, he waited for the slowly rowed barge.

When Lord Bagatela came alongside the quay his face was chalky. And in the cockpit beside him lay a blenched gentleman in blood-soaked silk who already had the gray of death upon his aristocratic face. Captain Fernando was handed up. He saw Mike standing there and reached out feebly and pleadingly toward him.

"Almirante," whispered Fernando. "They . . . attacked in full force . . . thousand of them. Only . . . only my flagship got away . . . after it could do nothing more. Of the fleet . . . there are not thirty men left alive for

there was no quarter. It's . . . all gone . . . almirante. Your fleet . . . I should never have helped take it from you. I wanted to be forgiven . . . please, almirante. I am dying."

"Aye," said Mike sadly. "You're forgiven. May whatever place you go to have a kinder god than this. Good luck, Fernando."

Mike turned aside as they bore the captain away. No typewriter in the sky here. Nothing but real, agonizing death. Those streaks down from the scuppers of the *Josef y Maria,* real blood had made those.

"There he is!" cried a priest excitedly. "There he is!" And some thirty church troops rushed in to close on Mike—and found Lord Bagatela between their quarry and themselves.

"Stay!" cried Bagatela. "Stay, or my guard will fire!" And his guard leaped to man the bow chaser of the small barge.

"He's infidel!" cried Father Mercy. "He disobeys the church!"

"You've no authority to touch one of my staff, church or no church!" roared Bagatela.

"He is not one of your staff!" howled Father Mercy.

"If he had commanded that fleet, the buccaneers would be dead to a man!" countered Bagatela. "I see it now. He had a plan and that plan would have worked. And now, just when we may be attacked, you wish to throw him on a rack. Think of your own filthy necks, you hell-hounds!"

Father Mercy stopped, for the populace was beginning to take it up and it is never good policy for a member of

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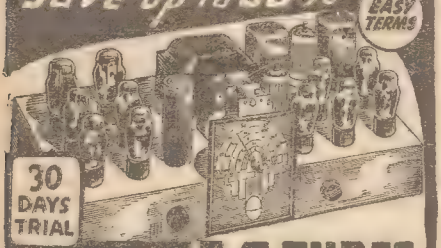

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the church to show such thirst for vengeance against such protest.

Father Mercy and the other priests backed up and with them went their troops. And Mike forgot about them. He was already looking to the sea.

"How's that, eh?" said Lord Bagatela. "How's that?"

"Thanks," said Mike indifferently. "Do you think your forts can withstand a bombardment from a fleet?"

"Maybe," said Bagatela. "But a fleet that size, such as Fernando reported—"

"I'm thinking so myself. Governor, have the guns off the *Josef y Maria*, for she's no use to us now. Have them mounted here on the shore to oppose landing. If they get past your forts, they'll try to sweep ashore and we'll met them here with grape."

"You have authority," said Bagatela eagerly, sweating at the picture Mike had so indifferently painted. "Do anything you like, sir. Anything!"

"It will be little enough now," said Mike. "Oh, well— Get a runner off to Panama City. If we fall here, they'll come across the Isthmus and attack there. Get reinforcements if you can, but I don't think we'll have time before the devils stop binding up their wounds."

"Immediately," said Bagatela, hurrying off.

Mike smiled a little. It had its points, this business of being branded, so offhandedly, a military genius and, by that token alone becoming one. Well! There was little hope now, but he'd try what he could. In one respect he *had* changed the plot and so he had a very faint hope that he might change it further. With fury, then, he went about the task of trying to make that faint hope bloom.

"And so," said Horace Hackett, grandly laying aside his latest chapter,

"that is how it goes to date. Now Bristol—"

Jules shook his head sorrowfully. "I don't like it."

Horace looked around the chromium-plated office as though searching for a witness to this blasphemy. He found one in René LaFayette, who, manuscripts on his lap, was dozing comfortably awaiting his turn with the publisher.

"You hear that?" said Horace. "You hear that, René? He says he doesn't like it. He says he doesn't like the greatest sea battle ever written!"

"I didn't either," said René helpfully.

"See?" said Jules. "He didn't either. And from the way you are protesting I think you don't like it neither, Horace."

"Me? Why I sweat blood writing that sea fight! Can't you just see Bristol, swooping at the head of his hellish crew down upon the Spaniards? Can't you hear the roar of cannon and the screams of maimed and mangled men? Can't—"

"Nope," said Jules, "and you can't neither." He looked accusingly at Horace. "That's what you writers always do. You take some point in your yarn that you don't like and so you figure an editor won't like it so you come in and tell the editor just how swell that point is. You writers are a lot of fakes!"

Mortally wounded, judging from the appearance of his round, somewhat oily face, Horace sank back and was silent.

"Nope," said Jules, "I don't like it. Where was this Spanish admiral, huh? You don't say a word about this Spanish admiral in this whole fight. Bristol comes up and there's the Spanish fleet. So Bristol tackles them and the Spanish fleet sinks. That ain't tough enough, see? You got to have it a lot tougher on Bristol. Now what's he got to fight but a few shore batteries? And do you think them Spaniards would be so stupid as to send out a lot of gold when there was a pirate fleet waiting to take it? And—"

"All right," said Horace, peeved. "All right, I didn't think it was so good either."

"Well, your strong man in this story is this Spanish admiral and where was he?"

"I dunno," said Horace. "You got to understand that sometimes, when you're writing, a story just takes care of itself."

"Well, that one didn't. Here you are at the climax, and yet you ain't got any Spanish admiral in charge of that fleet or anything. This is a sea story, not a land story, and if Bristol is going to get this Spanish admiral to rights and recover Lady Marion, why it's got to be done on the sea. They gotta have a fight on the quarterdeck of the admiral's flagship."

"That's been done!" said Horace.

"So what? It was good, wasn't it?" Jules, having won his point, looked smug. "Now you get up a fight that won't look like two kids swatting at each other with straws. This has got to be powerful, see? It's the whole story!"

"You mean I've got to tear up perfectly good copy?" said Horace.

"Why not?" said Jules unsympathetically. "It ain't good anyway."

"You hear that, René? He says to tear up pages and pages!"

"You're lucky he didn't make you tear up the book if it's all as lousy as that," said René.

"Nuts," said Horace. "Just because a guy can write good you expect him to write good all the time! All right, I'll tear up that chapter and to hell with your deadline."

"You tear it up *and* rewrite it *and* get it in here in time to go to press Monday or I'll . . . I'll let Tritewell illustrate it!"

Horace shuddered. "All right," he surrendered. He got up and gathered the manuscript into its envelope and slouched away. When he passed René LaFayette he muttered, "And after all the drinks I've bought *you*."

René grinned.

XI.

All was serene in the town of Nombre de Dios. The monotonously blue sea spread without a ripple beyond the channel and the empty bay was undisturbed save for two barges hauling cannon out of the wreck of the *Josef y Maria*.

The shore battery, protected by logs and screened by brush behind the quay, was growing with the sweat of several hundred Indian slaves. Up and down through the works strode Mike, making suggestions, ordering changes, attending to the best disposition of the guns. He was weighed upon by the impossibility of holding this place against such a fleet as he knew was coming. Now and again before sudden reinforcements of one character or another had magically appeared, but, so far, nothing untoward had happened. And for three toilsome days he had flayed this battery into existence, working three shifts through the hot days and nights until he himself was worn to gauntness. In addition he had sent out small vessels with orders to return instantly with any word of the buccaneers, and these reports awakened him each time he tried to rest.

The Lady Marion had been very sweet, but she had not mentioned that he should rest for fear he might take this adversely, believing her still anxious to be rescued—which she most certainly was not, even to the point of writing a note to Bristol and sending it by a known spy.

At three o'clock that afternoon, Lord Bagatela came waddling down to see what went on and within another half-hour Mike had laid his last gun.

Mike, mopping at his face with a linen kerchief given him by Trombo, paused to wave it in the direction of the long battery.

"Well, there she is," said Mike. "And now we'll have up the powder and balls and grape and we can at least make it uncomfortable for them when they arrive."

"Uncomfortable?" gaped Bagatela. "My dear almirante, I do hope that you can promise more than that!"

"I'm too tired to be optimistic," said Mike.

Bagatela looked along the battery and sighed. "I do hope something comes of this. You've worked these men to rags, and when I think of that, it reminds me that you haven't slept a great deal either. Shouldn't you take a rest after all this labor? So that your thoughts will be clear if they come on the morrow?"

"I suppose I should," said Mike. "Well, I'll be off. If anything happens, call me immediately."

"Indeed I will!" said Bagatela.

Mike started up the curving road through the town toward his house. And then it happened!

There was a ripping sound somewhere high overhead. The whole coast trembled! There was a repetition of splashes in the harbor and a shaking roar along the beach! All went dark!

Mike was no longer on the path; he was on the quarter-deck of the *Josef y Maria!*

Dazedly he gazed around him through the night, surprised that all was so calm again and that the few sailors who worked at a deadeye did not seem aware of anything having taken place. There was a full moon in the sky and, if Mike remembered properly, "last night" had seen the moon in its last quarter. By the brilliance of it he had a clear view of the beach and another shock.

No shore battery!

Days and days of work and now no sign!

Anxiously he scanned the forts which, before, had been wholly on the north side of the channel. Now there were not only twice as many ramparts and embrasures on the north side, but also a massive fortress directly across from it on the south side!

The character of the town seemed but slightly altered save that it was bigger, better lighted and appeared to have more people in it, judging from the amount of music and laughter which came out across the water.

Mike took a turn around the deck. He was not even jolted to find the harbor filled with ships. Yes, filled. Nearly the entire Spanish naval fleet as well as the plate ships were there in force, lighted like churches and just as rugged.

"Almirante!"

Mike turned to find Captain Fernando, in the best of health, at his side.

"Almirante, I have just received word from an advice-boat captain that the buccaneer fleet is now but a few leagues from Nombre de Dios and coming up a strong wind astern!"

Mike heard Fernando and he also heard something else—the faint rattle of keys high in the sky.

"Very good," Mike heard himself say. "You may fire recall guns and have

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State of New York, County of New York (*ss.*)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. W. Ralston, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Unknown, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

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trumpeters sound quarters. How much does it lack until dawn?"

"Five hours, almirante."

"Aye, five hours. And within seven those English dogs will be shark bait. Pass the word for a captains' conference."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Fernando.

When Fernando had gone away an ominous gray shape drifted across the quarter-deck toward Mike. "Almirante," simpered Father Mercy, "I would like now to make claim for the English captives. The rack starves for heretics."

Mike was about to make violent retort when from his lips came the words: "Aye, the rack must be fed and the stake as well. You'll have fodder for your religious zeal before the night and day are done, Father Mercy."

"Thank you, almirante. And the fellow Bristol?"

"Ah, Bristol," Mike heard himself say. "Father, if there's anything left of Bristol, ye're welcome."

"The English girl," said Father Mercy. "What about her now?"

"The Lady Marion," said Mike, angry at being a puppet but helpless, "is my particular own—if I can tame her."

Father Mercy grinned evilly and drifted away.

While trumpets blared and drums rolled and recall cannon thundered, Mike leaned on the taffrail of the *Josef y Maria* and looked on. Barges came flying back to the ships aglitter with the helms, corselets and pikes of the soldiery. The vessels teemed with confident activity and orders flew swiftly back and forth.

And then the typewriter in the sky faded away and left the activity continuing.

Mike was worried. Quarter moons which became full moons instantly and a fleet which sprang back up out of Davy Jones' locker and dead men walking again were no worry to him. But those words he had said about the Lady Marion, about the English captives—Things had changed. And Marion—

He leaped down to the waist from the stern castle and bawled for his barge. When it was laid alongside the stage he jumped into the stern sheets and gripped the tiller. Trombo dropped into the bow and Trombo's bastinado cracked out to give energy to the oarsmen.

THE BARGE fairly leaped through the water under Mike's urging and swerved in alongside the quay. With the command to wait, Mike sprang to the dock and started up the hill toward his house. But Lord Bagatela was there to make him pause.

"All is ready ashore, almirante. Your trap is laid for them and we cannot help but win. How goes the sea?"

"All's well," said Mike. And edging away, "Did you notice anything strange a while ago?"

"Strange?" said Bagatela. "No, can't say that I did."

"And the full moon?" said Mike. "It was at its last quarter last night."

"Oh, I've seen those things happen before," said Bagatela. "The will of God."

"And the fleet out there?" said Mike. "It's there again."

"Why, it's been there all along, hasn't it? Why? What should have happened to it?"

Mike departed, fearing the worst. He was greeted with huzzahs as he hastened through the streets and several times had to refuse to stop and drink to victory.

On the veranda of his house he paused, wondering if he could take what was coming, and he knew now that come it must. A servant threw open the door for him and he strode in.

"The Lady Marion?"

"Is in her room, under guard, as usual," said the servant.

Mike motioned away the guards and thrust open her door. He stopped.

Tall and regal, her face wreathed with disdain, she faced him. "Well, now, Sir Admiral! You did not expect Bristol to come, and yet come he has! And he'll pick your rotten bones before night."

"Aye, so even you think he's a vulture!" said Mike. He had tried to stop that, but now again he was aware of the clicking sound on high.

"Now go to your defeat!" said the Lady Marion. "My curse shall follow you!"

Mike got mad. Unaccountably mad. He slammed the door and rushed away, down the hill toward his ships, and as he went, to the sound of bugles blaring, the clicking again faded. Mike ceased to be angry and was only hurt. He stopped and faced about, irresolute.

Marion! His darling Marion! Marion whose sweet head upon his shoulder had solaced these long months of waiting, whose lips had drawn away the bitterness of his being trapped. And now—

There was no use. Desolated, he went on down the hill. Bristol. All this had to be fixed for Bristol! Bristol, a damned puppet!

Well, he'd see about that. He had a huge fleet and the harbor was now so strong that anything short of a miracle

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would find it stanch. He must not allow himself to be betrayed now. He'd do for Bristol and then, coming back, he'd awake the love which Marion had had for him.

"Damn you!" said Mike, shaking his fist at the sky. "I'll show you! Do you hear me? I'll knock your fair-haired son of a witch into the briny and then we'll see what you'll do about it! I'm going to *win!*"

And back aboard the *Josef y Maria* he stalked up and down the table, past the swinging lanthorns, past the eager faces of his captains, and gave them their orders.

"Gerrero," said Mike. "Your squadron will act as a decoy. You will draw away from the battle line as though fleeing and when the pirates come through that hole you will ware ship and knife his column in two. Then you, Bolando, with your three vessels, will come up into the action and crush Bristol's spearhead against our battle line's rear. And you, Sorenzo, will swing your squadron on our left wing in a half-moon so as to engulf the half of Bristol's fleet which will not pass through the break. We will then maneuver to do all possible damage and, finally, draw off to seaward. The wind will force Bristol down upon the forts and, while we hold off on a broad reach, both our vessels and the forts will hammer him to fragments. Above all things, gentlemen, watch the flagship for your signals. And do not allow yourself to be boarded, for the soul of this strategy is to split up Bristol, reek havoc to his ships and then throw him into a position where destruction to his fleet is inevitable. That is all. We sail in a half-hour. His most Catholic majesty expects every man to die rather than surrender."

Glowing with confidence the captains trooped out. And Mike stared after them until they had gone, still resolute.

XII.

DAWN cracked like the firing of a pistol and there was the sun, just up over the eastern horizon, a great scarlet ball which sent ribbons of flame quivering across the zenith. The sea was smooth, and though this hour in these waters should have had no wind, there was wind, about twenty miles of it, quite sufficient to send prows knifing and foaming. But no ships were moving.

In this moment all was still. There was the buccaneer fleet, a long line of small, fast vessels drawn in battle order from north to south. Here was the Spanish fleet, huge and ponderous and brilliantly gilded, drawn in a parallel line. There was a mile and a half of open water between them and the black silhouettes of the English against the sun.

Mike, cloaked against the dawn chill, leaned his telescope against the deck house to steady it and focused it upon the English fleet, but he could see nothing for he was nearly blinded by the sun. He lowered the brass and shook his head.

As nearly as he could tell, they had two-to-one superiority over these English, broadside for broadside, but Mike was no longer a trusting sort. The lead ship, opposite his own, he supposed to be Bristol's, for it resembled the *Fleetwood,* the vessel he, Mike, had stolen from St. Kitts. Just how it had gotten back into Bristol's command he was not sure, but there it was. Behind the *Fleetfoot* ranged thirty-six vessels of varying sizes, but all rigged square without a lateen showing on any stick.

The ships were sailing now and water hissed under the stern of the *Josef y Maria* while braces creaked in the strain of swift air, driving the vessel harder. Behind her plowed nearly fifty Spanish ships of line. This heartened Mike in one respect, but in another made him nervous, for he had left port with but twenty. A rake of his telescope showed him that all bore the ensign of the Caribbean command and so were his vessels, and that the men on their decks were numerously standing to quarters with lintstocks lighted. Marines were in their tops, matches poised until they came within musket distance. Gun captains checked the lay of their pieces and all went on in a quite usual manner.

The two battle lines were forging toward a point where they would range.

"Fire me a serpentine, extreme range," said Mike to Fernando. "We'll gauge by it."

The word was passed and a serpentine crew on the main deck elevated the weapon's muzzle with handskipe and slid quoins out until the base of the cannon was resting on the last bed of the carriage.

"Clear!" said the gun captain.

The gunners leaped aside and put a strain on the beeching which limited the recoil. The gun captain ran a line of powder with his belt horn down from the touchhole, along the gun to the base ring. He smartly applied his smoking lintstock, snapping his hand out of the way. There was a huff and a spit and a thin line of hot smoke soared from the touchhole.

Bam!

The cannon leaped upward about three feet and back about six, the crew straining at the beechings. The white smoke engulfed the port and the side of the ship and the crew.

The fifty-three-and-a-half-pound ball skittered over the sea and plunked into a swell two thousand paces from the

ship, about five hundred short of the closing *Fleetfoot*.

"Toss a basilisk into him just to show him we can," said Mike.

The word was passed forward to the fo'c's'le where the long-range five-inch cannon usually acted as bow chasers. The crew there slued the short carriage about, blocking the wheels against the roll. Ten pounds of powder in a parchment cartridge went down the muzzle, followed by the wadding and the fifteen-pound shot. The muzzle was elevated and the gun captain applied his powder horn and then cried, "Clear!" The linstock drew a huff of flame.

Bam!

Mike lost track of the ball against the sun, but in a moment saw a spar come tumbling down from the *Fleetfoot's* foremast.

"All basilisks," said Mike. "At will."

Pennons went rushing up the signal hoist and, a moment later, the Spanish fleet had its light long-rangers in action.

THE ENGLISH could not yet reply to this sparse fire. Up and down the Spanish battle line, at long intervals, puffs of smoke and thunder indicated the loss of more English rigging.

"We're closing in," said Mike. "Stand ready with cannon royal on the gun deck."

The signal hoist was alive again and word went down to fifty gun decks. Battery captains poised themselves at the forward end of their long batteries and waited. Gun captains waited on the battery captains.

The range narrowed down to eighteen hundred paces.

"Fire!" said Mike.

On fifty ships battery captains loped from fore bulkhead to aft, chopping down a hand as each gun was passed. If they had all been fired at once, the gunwales would not have stood the strain. And so their flame and fury lasted down the length of the vessel for half a minute, lasting over the fleet for nearly three minutes and hiding all the gilt and all the flags completely in a fog.

"Ware ship," said Mike.

The signal could not be seen, but it was a usual maneuver. Presenting a stern to the enemy while smoke hid much of the vessel, the ship of line could go downwind as it turned, thus staying with the smoke a little longer and coming out of it with the fully loaded banks bearing.

"Fire," said Mike.

Thunder again engulfed the Spanish fleet and once more the water and air, bulkheads and spars around the English received a murderous drubbing. While only twenty percent of the broadsides began to take any effect, there was weight enough in those sixty-six-pound cannon royals to blast the heart out of any enemy.

Again and again the maneuver was repeated, perfectly timed, the loading going on with haste while the loaded batteries were presented and fired. But now the English with their demicannon were getting to work. The third-of-a-hundredweight balls plunked noisily into the sea and sprayed the decks, plucked spars down and knocked great gouges in the bulkheads, sending violent and jagged splinters flying everywhere, deadlier than shrapnel.

The guns were getting hot and had to be swabbed, which slowed the Spanish firing. Now, when they recoiled, they very often leaped violently to crash against the beams overheard or knocked themselves on their sides or, getting free, wiped out their gun crews in a breath and went thundering on across

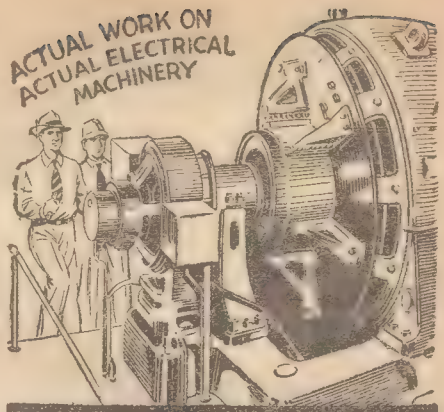
the gun decks to batter havoc everywhere until at last caught and overturned.

MIKE PACED back and forth, splinters plucking at him, feeling the acrid powder smoke in his lungs, already deaf from the cannonading and almost blind. The sun, though the engagement had already lasted an hour, was not one inch higher above the horizon than it had been at the beginning!

Until now Mike had taken this thing as a matter of course, for there lurked in his mind a carelessness born of the fact he was a puppet and that all this was stage scenery. But now happened a thing which hurled him into reality with soul-shocking force.

The buccaneer fleet had worked in within six hundred paces, pouring in a continuous cannonade and taking fearsome punishment. And now, by double-charging their few mammoth cannon royal and shotting them with chain-connected balls, they commenced upon the clear of the galleon quarter-decks and the severance of shrouds. One such shot came tumbling like a loose dumbbell from the *Fleetfoot,* swinging around and around, traveling slowly enough to be visible. It swung ponderously one last time as it passed over the quarter-deck of the *Josef y Maria.* Captain Fernando did not even give it pause, for it mangled him into two chunks and his feet still stepped back to brace as shoulders and head were squashed against the helm, spattering the quartermasters.

Mike had flinched and now, staring, he felt himself turn green-white. From there his glance, shocked to acuteness, swept to the waist of the vessel and saw how red the scuppers ran into the sea, how the sand laid down to prevent slipperiness from just this cause had been washed away. Tangles of spars and



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lines, splinters, the smoking ruins of cannon, the smashed gunwales, the heaps of slain from which came tributaries to feed the scuppers' flowing, made him shiver. Above the ceaseless roar of guns and the shrill cracking of musketry sounded the agonized screams of the wounded and dying.

He fought to get back his hold on his nerves, to cultivate again that contemptuous air of detachment, to remind himself that all this was in the hands of one Horace Hackett. He regained his nerve in a few moments, but not for any of these reasons. It was Bristol that was doing this to him, Bristol who would soon defeat him, Bristol who would soon take back forever the woman Mike loved.

Angry now, Mike commanded the hoist once more and up leaped the gay flags from out the white smoke and into the sunlit sky beside the topmasts.

Whether the order was obeyed or not, Mike could not tell. But within a very few minutes the line of English ships bent in the center, making a V which speared into the break and must have appeared at the far end of the Spanish battle line.

Mike cupped his hands and bawled the order to his sailing master which sent the wounded *Josef y Maria* about on a tack to beat eastward across the stern of the *Fleetfoot,* thus crossing the English T. The plainly done stern-castle of the buccaneer vessel loomed through the choking mist, prey to the higher guns of the great galleon.

With the chop of his hand Mike sent his battery captains rushing aft, causing each cannon of the starboard broadside to batter murderously into the *Fleetfoot.* Balls from snipers in the buccaneer's rigging tore up wood about Mike's feet as the stern of the *Fleetfoot* came abeam and then abaft of the *Josef y Maria.* Not a port light or a plank

was left in the *Fleetfoot's* stern and so close had been the gun mouths that fire now jabbed greedily among the ruin. Fore and aft the *Fleetfoot's* decks had been swept by splinter and ball and now her main began to tilt slowly to starboard while the topmen either dived widely into the sea or sought to scramble down. The *Fleetfoot* was a shuddering ruin.

The ship next in line behind Mike took the buccaneer next the *Fleetfoot,* passing between it and the wreck and blowing it, like its mate, into fragments. No. 3 Spanish ship crossed the T the third English ship down and again made a quivering horror out of a once-saucy bark. No. 4 Spanish took No. 4 English again, and so went the succession of penetrations, like a multifingered hand penetrating the gaps of its multifingered mate.

That the English were still able to move at all was a shock to Mike, for when he looked back he saw that the *Fleetfoot,* splinters, corpses and flames, still proceeded toward the break in the Spanish line, even though the *Josef y Maria's* sister which had been at the other end had begun the same awful toll of that side of the English V. And, even though the squadron which had pulled out to make the trap came about, cutting through the English, that still did not stop the infiltration of the buccaneers through the Spanish formation.

Punished until it was incredible that it could still float, the buccaneer fleet finally gained the leeward of the Spanish fleet and went coursing down toward Nombre de Dios.

MIKE MADE a hasty survey of his vessels. Fully twenty were in sinking condition, their crews fighting off sharks in the water, the screams of the wounded cut off and turned on gruesomely by the slap of the waves. With signals, Mike caused several of the Spanish vessels to swerve out of line to pick up survivors and then, with the *Josef y Maria* making the final cut of the figure-eight maneuver which his fleet had executed to so rake the buccaneers, steered for the stragglers of the buccaneers and began to chop them to chunks with calculatingly murderous fire as he passed them close aboard.

There was elation struggling to surge up from Mike's heart, but he kept it down until this was done. Now he would ride the English up against the channel batteries at Nombre de Dios, and if a man escaped it would only be because the Spanish had willed to pick him up as a prisoner. And the buccaneers seemed unaware of the two-sided press which was about to crush them. This and this alone worried Mike now. It did not seem possible that Bristol, the vaunted Captain Bristol, could so foolishly allow himself to be smashed in such a trap. Still—there were the buccaneers, sailing handsomely, even eagerly, into the jaws of destruction.

Mike paced the quarter-deck. Now and again, as the *Josef y Maria* gybed to cross a wounded English quarter and blast him completely out of action, he looked uneasily along the wrecked decks for Bristol. That he had not seen Bristol when the *Fleetfoot* had been raked worried him. That he was succeeding worried him. That he had not heard any clattering on high worried him further still.

There was decidedly something very spooky about this action. He was winning it!

Behind him the sun still hung its inches above the horizon and the sky was still bathed in its scarlet light, which

made blood out of the sea and tinted the sails a deceptively charming pink. Mike knew that Horace had forgotten to move his time. He spoke of it to his sailing master in a lull, but this fellow found nothing strange about it!

And then, suddenly, the sun leaped up the sky and in the blink of an eye was at the zenith!

The sailing master didn't think that was odd either.

When Mike pointed out to Trombo that there were nearly as many English ships left in action as there had been at the beginning, even though half the English fleet had been sunk, Trombo shrugged and muttered something about the will of God.

Ranging back and forth and nipping at the heels of the English, driving them downwind to Nombre de Dios, the Spaniards seemed to be enjoying themselves. There seemed to be only one thought in the buccaneering fleet and that was to get away from the horrible punishment which kept searching their decks. They seemed to be quite blind that they were coursing down upon a mighty shore battery.

At last the coast lost its blue cast and became green and filled with definite markings, and the harbor of Nombre de Dios opened its mouth to them. And like a host of shepherds running sheep, the Spanish forced in the wings and made the English spear toward that harbor. And like quaking sheep the English let themselves he herded.

Mike kept telling himself that there was something wrong with this victory. But maybe Horace had had a stroke—he hoped.

AND THEN the foremost buccaneer, astonishingly enough the *Fleetfoot,* came into range of the Spanish forts. And swiftly narrowed the mile of blue waves to a gap a quarter of that.

And nothing happened.

Mike bawled to his signalmen and up rushed flags to break angrily, commanding the shore batteries to wake up and fire. Half the buccaneer fleet was in range now and, as the seconds raced by, finally was all within.

And still the forts did not fire.

"Treason!" howled Mike. "Trombo! Run that hoist again!"

Evidently the commander of the fort was not at all interested in Mike's signals.

Still, Mike told himself to cool himself down; it was not such a task to cut these English up, anyway, with just his fleet. They were so badly wrecked that they could not do much in return. He shouted for hoists to order his fleet to close in.

Not until then did Mike get an inkling of what had happened to them. They were speeding up on the English which were in the shoals just off the forts. And the forts opened fire! But not on the English.

A hurricane of smoking hot iron crashed out at the Spanish fleet, and in one blast sent masts tottering and magazines exploding and men falling by the regiment!

Stunned inactivity descended upon the Spanish. Half a dozen ships broached to and lay there broadside, perfect targets as their sails shivered helplessly.

The forts thundered again and again.

The Spaniards struggled to beat up out of the shoal waters where the lighter-draft Englishmen had run. On every side the flaming ruins of tall galleons struck rocks. The sea was alive with the swimming men and aglitter with the metal of scattered spars.

Suddenly the wind increased in force, and those which had struggled free on their six-point tacks now made so much leeway that they were again within range of the butchering forts.

Orders were nothing. The *Josef y Maria* clawed to windward while English ships, sailing, incredibly, much closer and faster, rushed out like wolfhounds to hang on her and rake her decks with flame. In seconds she was a smoking shambles, and a buccaneer to either side was casting grapnels over her gunwales to lay her aboard.

Cutlashes were making quick work of her boarding bets and now came to her decks a howling flood of half-clothed demons to sweep her shattered defenders forward and, thence, over her bows into the sea.

Across a deck carpeted with the blood of Spaniards and decorated with dismembered corpses came a hurricane of a man—Bristol!

Rapier in fist, battle lust distorting his face, the English captain leaped up the stern-castle gangway, shouting his battle cry.

Mike stood amid the ruins of his quarter-deck and toppled mizzle and beheld the devil swoop upon him. This, then, was the end. This was the part where Bristol ran him through for a dirty spick and fed his corpse to the sharks. And this was not cardboard scenery or puppet men. Pain and death were real!

Knowing well that he was doomed without trial, Mike acted without a glance at the rules. He sprang back without drawing his rapier, for he knew destiny meant death with that. A small serpentine which had been swiveled about to sweep the waist, but whose crew had died in the act without firing it, was pointed at Bristol. The linstock lay sizzling upon the planking. Mike scooped it up and slapped the touch-

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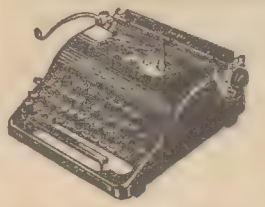

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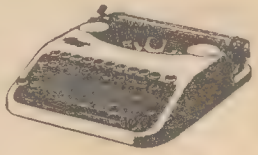

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hole. The huff singed his hand and then there was a white-hot flash!

Bristol was wreathed in smoke, untouched even by powder sparks.

Mike was struggling in the sea, swept away toward the shore by the spar which he had grasped. And in his battered ears rang the English cheer which meant victory, and the whir of a contented typewriter in the sky.

XIII.

It was nearly midnight when Mike, cast up again by the sea but only because of his own endeavor, gained the wooded heights above Nombre de Dios. He had struggled across the battlefield behind the forts, thus answering the riddle of the treachery. Bristol had landed a force to take them from the unfortified rear while the Spanish fleet was sucked into the trap from the sea.

There was no typewriter clattering now. There was nothing but the hot, sultry wind in the palms to remind him of it. The sullen sky was low upon Nombre de Dios and the smoldering ruins of the sacked city added their greasy thickness to the night.

It was the end, that was certain.

It was all over, though the English vessels still stood there in the roadstead, swinging at their cables while their crews debauched themselves. The story for Mike was done!

But Mike, weary and wounded, with no magic words to heal his hurts or his exhaustion, was not content. He had for one space changed that plot. And now there was no typewriter in the sky.

He had been created a swordsman without peer, a military genius, a clever and even treacherous gentleman. That had not been taken away.

Trombo was dead. They were all dead. But here was Mike, dragging himself through the tangle of wood to-

ward the night-shrouded house which had so long been his home.

The windows showed lights behind their blinds as he crept by them, but he had not come here to peep through cracks and skulk. His rapier was at his side and no matter how tired was his arm—

He stepped up to the porch and found a buccaneer sentry sprawled there, left to guard but now very drunk. Mike pulled a pistol from the fellow's sash and, holding the weapon in his left hand and keeping his sword in his right, kicked open the front door.

The table was very beautiful, lit by tall yellow candles whose soft beams fell upon Mike's crystal and gold. At one end sat the Lady Marion, painfully beautiful, smiling still though now she looked toward the door.

Bristol, silk-shirted and gold-sashed, started to his feet, the candlelight still in his eyes.

"Gog's wounds! Who's this?"

"I'm Mike de Wolf. The fellow you call Miguel St. Raoul de Lobo. Can it be," he added with sarcasm which had become habitual, "that I am not welcome in my own house?"

"Damme!" said Bristol. "Ye're a ghost!"

"No m'lad," said Mike. "It's you that are a ghost!"

Lady Marion was white as she looked from Mike to Bristol.

"But ye're dead!" cried Bristol. "With my own eyes I saw it!"

"You've got the same eyes now," said Mike.

"But why . . . have you come back?" said Bristol.

"To kill you," said Mike.

It had no great effect upon Bristol. He had led a charmed life for so long that he was afraid of nothing. He reached toward his rapier which lay on the arms of a chair beside the wall.

MIKE ACHED to drill him with the pistol, but he knew the effect it would have upon the Lady Marion. He was too weary and starved to duel and he did not intend to give Bristol, who had had all the breaks, any others.

"Maybe you English fight before your women," said Mike. "I don't. There's light on the porch."

Bristol snorted in derision. "Marion, please pardon me while I kill this gentleman once and for all." And he strode past Mike, through the door and to the porch.

Mike shut the door behind himself and stood there for a moment looking at the English hero.

"You found her very glad to see you I've no doubt," said Mike, humanly prey to jealousy.

"Aye," said Bristol. "And I've a debt to pay you, you hound, for sullying her fair name."

"It's not so sullied but what you asked her to marry you," said Mike.

"So I did," said Bristol.

"And she accepted," said Mike, "and then, amid a very touching scene, she said she could see you marching in triumph through the streets of London with your name on every lip and that at last she had found a man brave enough to command her humbleness and that she would be content to spend the remainder of her life worshiping you. And then she kissed you."

"Of course," said Bristol. "But . . . how did you know?"

"There's a lot I know."

"I hope you know I do you favor to fight you. I've a town full of my men—"

"All drunk," said Mike, glancing

down the hill at the burning, raped wreck of the city. "And it's no favor."

Bristol shrugged. He had been pulling off his boots the better to grip the floor with his feet.

"I fear," said Mike, "that you'll never live to spend the millions in bullion you found here today. For, Tom Bristol, I intend to run you through."

"Garde!" cried Bristol.

Their blades crossed and, with furious attack and defense, they went at each other.

Mike thought the fury of Bristol's attack was the cause of the floor's shaking. He thought the way the lantern jiggled was done by a wild thrust. And he thought the roaring in his ears was in his head, an aftermath of cannon fire.

But it wasn't.

THE SHAKING was soon so violent that it threw both of them down. Bristol, cursing, struggled up and was again thrown. Mike saw the porch roof start to come down and scurried back.

Lightning flashed down the sky, bluely lighting the woods where trees were falling. Thunder, by its very sound, seemed capable of tearing Mike apart. The porch came down and Bristol and the sleeping buccaneer were devoured in its shambles.

A frightened voice was crying from within the house, and then the Lady Marion was at the door, striving to force away the beam which blocked her egress. Again the lightning flared and the rain slashed furiously down.

Mike seized the Lady Marion's wrist and pulled her through the opening.

"What's happening?" she wept in terror.

"Come with me," said Mike, running down the path.

Again the lightning wiped out the blackness for a space and again the thunder rolled angrily over the sky. The wind was swiftly increasing in force and the rain was hammering painfully upon Mike's bare face. The earth shook and cast them down.

Through the water Mike reached for the Lady Marion and clutched her to him. It was impossible to stand. The flaring in the sky showed her scared face close to his.

"What is it?" she cried out to him.

"An earthquake and a storm," said Mike. "Nothing more."

"Where is Bristol?"

"He's dead," said Mike. "I didn't kill him. He was hit by the beams and buried when the porch fell."

"He's dead!"

"Yes. Marion, look at me. Have you no memory of loving me? Have you no thought of all the months we were together. You were happy with me—"

"Mike! Hold me! Hold me, Mike! I'm frightened!"

He held her close to him.

Lightning flashed so close by that Mike felt its concussion. And then, looking up against the whitened sky, he saw the huge black limbs and trunk of a tree come hurtling down at them.

He clutched Marion, trying to protect her body with his own. The earth shook and then vanished. The lightning cracked and snarled and then rain and earth and sky and wind, all these were gone.

And Mike's arms were empty.

XIV.

"YOU O. K., buddy?" said the taxi driver. "You better let me take you home."

Mike looked wonderingly at the fel-

low, at the cab, at the dark street, quiet at this hour.

"If it's dough, you c'n pay me when you got it. But you shouldn't be lying here. Somebody'll clip you."

Mike got up with help. "I'm all right," he muttered.

"You don't smell like ye're loopy," said the cabby. "You been sick or something?"

"Yeah," said Mike. "Yeah, I been sick." He steadied himself against the lamp-post. "I'll be all right in a minute." He looked dazedly at the cab's license plates and finally it came home to him that they were those of the same year he had departed. It took him some little time to get it through his mind that he was back, alive and evidently safe.

"What's the name of this town?" said Mike.

"N'Yawk," said the cabby.

Mike felt relieved. He had come back, then.

"You sure you'll be all right?"

"Yeah. I feel fine now," said Mike.

"And you won't lemme take you home?"

"No. I'll walk a little ways if you don't mind."

"O. K., you're the boss," said the cabby, getting into his hack and driving away.

Mike stood there for a long time, getting himself adjusted to the strangeness of being home again. In a way it was swell to be back. He'd get his fingers in shape and take another crack at the Philharmonic. And he'd see René and Kurt and Win Colt and Horace—

It would be so funny seeing Horace Hackett. Would it be possible, he wondered, to ever tell Horace about all this? In a way he should, just so he'd never be put into a story again—but again he shouldn't because then Horace Hack-

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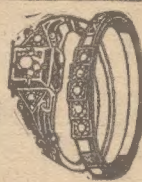
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ett's already gigantic opinion of himself would probably expand beyond endurable limits. Horace was always talking about the powers of an author.

Mike essayed a walk and found that his faintness was gone. He slouched along the street, hands in the pockets of his sport jacket, chin on chest.

He had tried not to think about it and he tried now once more. But he knew. He had lost her. He would never see her again, for she was not of this world, and the other—maybe it did not even exist now. He had lost her, the only woman he would ever love. And though he tried not to he could still feel her sobbing against him, knowing somehow that it was all over and done and that she was dead. He would never forget that— He stopped and braced himself against a wall.

"Move along, buddy," said a cop.

Mike moved along.

To find her—in a story. And now she would never be again.

He threw it off with bitterness. He was angry now. Angry with Horace Hackett, angry with this world and that other. Angry with the fate which had been handed him—

Ah, yes. The fate. It was his luck to meet somebody in a story and then return without her. It was his luck. But you couldn't expect the breaks all the time. You couldn't ask luck to run your way forever. He had had her for a little while, in a land ruled by a typewriter in the clouds. And now he was out of that and there was no type—

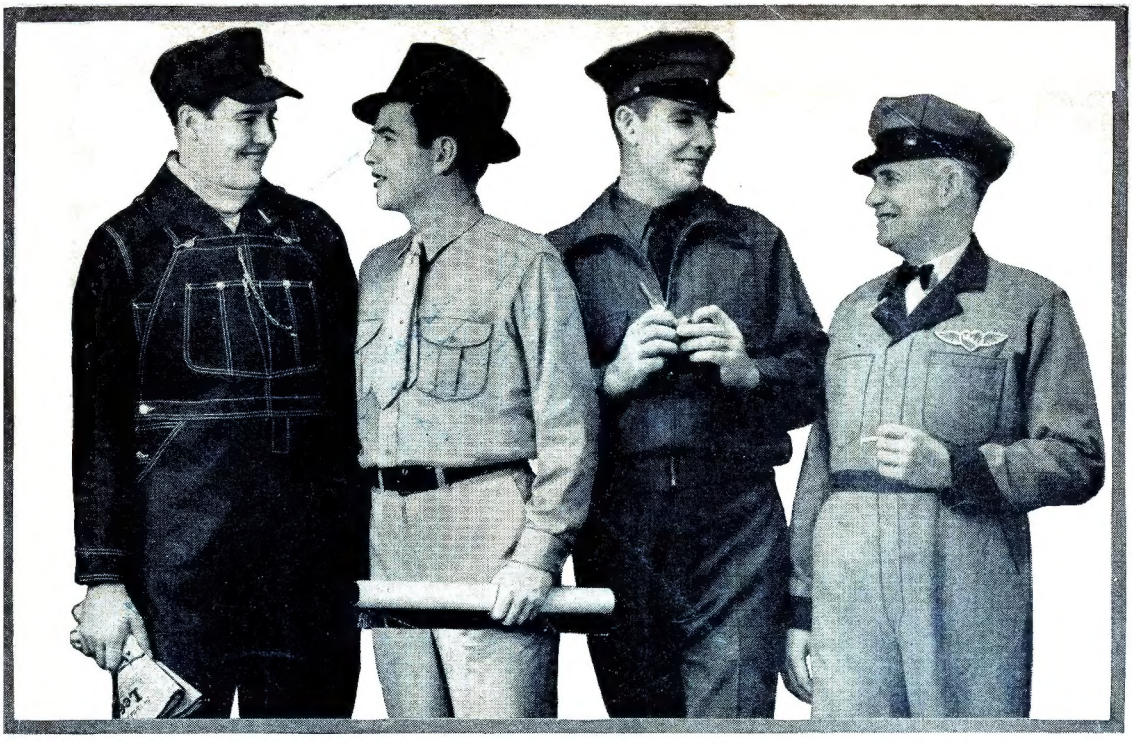
Abruptly Mike de Wolf stopped. His jaw slacked a trifle and his hand went up to his mouth to cover it. His eyes were fixed upon the fleecy clouds which scurried across the moon.

Up there—

God?

In a dirty bathrobe?

THE END.



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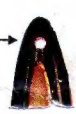

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